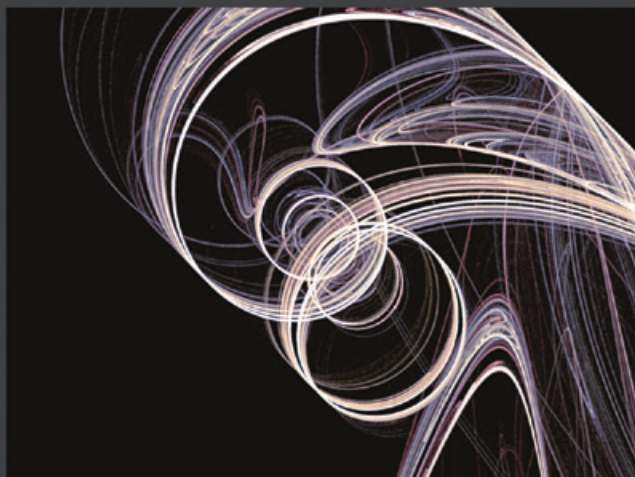


CROSS-ROADS. POLISH STUDIES IN CULTURE,  
LITERARY THEORY, AND HISTORY 19

Wojciech Ligęza

# World under Revision

The Poetry of Wisława Szymborska



PETER LANG

Wojciech Ligęza

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This book provides a comprehensive overview of the entirety of Wisława Szymborska's poetic oeuvre. The author employs in-depth historical reflection on Szymborska's beginnings to reveal that – without describing her post-war beginnings and reflecting on her early entanglement in socialist realist newspeak – Szymborska's mature anti-dogmatic attitude will remain unclear. The book shows how Szymborska's rhetoric and stylistics – figures of reservation, negation, contradiction, tautology, and repetition – are closely connected with the construction of the poetic world and affect the shape of her messages. After all, Wisława Szymborska is a poet of sophisticated wit, a surprising freedom of expression, and an unusual game with various literary styles, even with colloquial Polish.

### The Author

Wojciech Ligęza is a Polish professor of literary studies, literary critic, and essayist. Since 1984, he teaches at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. In his work, he focuses on twentieth-century Polish literature at home and abroad, especially the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz, and Zbigniew Herbert.

World under Revision

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## Introduction

Wisława Szymborska's poetry perceives people in the entirety of their existence; all things in their duration and change, bloom and death, the mystery of origins and unknown final destinies. Her poems embed people in a variety of nature's forms, chains them to evolution, and through the gift and curse of consciousness, they simultaneously receive a separate position; so much so that, as an exception among creatures, people feel cosmic loneliness. Szymborska's works link the praise of a multifarious world with reflection about nothingness. Existence is here the reverse side of nonexistence, the triumph of the game of coincidences, a momentary visit at reality, a fleeting affair with life. Under these conditions, there grows the astonishment with constantly experienced phenomena, which one cannot easily classify, tame, and appropriate. The earthly spectacle should be viewed with a fresh eye, without prejudice and aprioric axioms, but with full awareness that the task of cognition is feasible to a very limited extent, that participation in the performance is too short.

Szymborska's poetry runs the lines of semantic tension between the determinants of individual existence and one's belonging to the human race, between the history of our species and the entire history of evolution. We want to feel the peak of natural beings while Szymborska shows humanity as a group of aggressors in the world of nature. Therefore, Szymborska's animals – our *friars minor* – may reasonably accuse us and question the human wellbeing. Szymborska's Book of Genesis is incomplete; it gathers more questions than declarations of certainty. The distance that separates “Devonian tail fins” from the writing hand remains unimaginable. We should understand such approximation of prehistory to the modern times as a lesson of humility. The human species does not have an aristocratic pedigree because it clearly belongs to the biological community of beings. Thus, we must rethink the problem of anthropocentrism and revise human usurpations. Szymborska's original poetic approach makes the individual into a living natural museum, for the body stores the memory of its predecessors in natural history; it exists in many places simultaneously. *Hic et nunc* looks at itself in *semper et ubique*.

For Szymborska, the experience of history does not teach us anything, studies of the past bring no elevating examples. The lesson of history is a lesson of crime. Evil remains unchanged, it revives with extraordinary strength, while hatred holds a high place among the motivations of deeds. The suffering of individuals builds historical continuity. Lie, violence, and fear engulf seem indestructible.

Perhaps more often than the previous ages, the twentieth century dressed evil in the costume of good to demagogically manipulate ethical sensitivity and experiment with human conscience.

The human person does not want to be a child of the age and would rather forget about these dependencies. Our aspirations fall by the confluence of political circumstances and collective interests, always harmful for the individual. Szyborska observes all forms of social utopias with great suspicion. She deconstructs the language of ideological doctrines with no belief in the effectiveness of their supposedly revolutionary spells. Her conclusion is sad: it was supposed to be different, but it is as it is. Szyborska avoids grand words to defend the downtrodden; against the ruthless forces of evil, she juxtaposes the defenseless and priceless life of the human individual.

Group photographs make individual separateness very problematic. No man's space is inhabited by a community of anonymous people. We are unable to compose biographies of responsibility and reflection from facts described in the language of large numbers, from crumbs of events devoid of ethical rigor and deeper meaning. Where can an individual feel at home? Love gives a chance, but this unique feeling is exceptionally rare in the scale of the entire cosmos. Agreement with another person consists mainly of misunderstandings. One must test love's magic in all ways, so as not to succumb to premature infatuation. Besides, we lead a lonely game with existence in attempts to recognize its vague rules.

There obviously are vast regions of better realities in which the ordinary laws of life are suspended. For example, the contemplation of artworks temporarily liberates us from the passage of time. However, Szyborska cannot believe in the paradise of aesthetes. She shows the antinomy of art representation and the game of chance in everyday life. She juxtaposes two contradictory arrangements: human time – directed toward death – and the time of eternal art. What comes to the fore are the deficiencies of everyday experience, which doom us to constant improvisation, confusion of dubious explanations, deceptive senses, and imperfect mind. In turn, the language of art suffers from an excess of order; it belies human fate as it cuts the margins of life too depending on artistic convention. Art makes the complicated dramaturgy of existence emerge in suspiciously clear compositions. Artworks speak nothing about their mortal creators. Life circumstances of the creation of painting, musical, and literary works – as far away from perfection as possible – restore the relationship between the creator and artwork by the drama of truth. It is poetry that may not respect the reception patterns accepted in culture and allow itself for the indicated restitutions. If Szyborska describes the negated possibilities and

potential versions of events, this does not mean that poetic art – having given up the creative illusions – is only capable of effective suicide. On the contrary, her poetry multiplies the world in the forms of existence. Negation makes it easier to journey to the land of the nonobvious.

The consolation of philosophy also appears illusory to Szymborska. Texts of wise men do not bring the most important answers about the goal and meaning, the time and form of human presence in the world. Each of us must at own risk constantly ask the first and most important questions, which are called by Szymborska “naive questions.” The lyrical “I” of her poems assumes various challenges of the outside world, wants to live among many unknowns, chooses the bravery of being, and agrees for “joy and despair.” The defense of integral humanity that conveys Pascal’s misery and grandeur happens without verbal celebration. For Szymborska, irony leads to compassion, humor to sadness, analytical distance to the need of conversation. We should not consider her linguistic virtuosity as a point of arrival, because she predominantly follows ethical commitments.

Szymborska values innovation and surprise. She collides different types of language with each other. She meanders from classicist clarity of expression to renewed Baroque wit, juxtaposes the precision of aphorism with everyday speech, combines metaphor with objectivity and anecdotes in which the simple concrete plays the key role. Szymborska does not agree to any kind of world captured in language. She breaks down speech patterns and distrusts universally approved values. She does not tolerate thinking patterns and rejects mentoring attitudes. Noteworthy, her oeuvre conveys only a small number of poems in the genre of personal lyric. The choice of dialog is to write for others or carefully attempt to recognize a common fate. Each of Szymborska’s judgments comes with many reservations.

Szymborska willingly uses a transcending gaze that stares from the distance of stars upon the life on the small planet Earth. Thus, her gaze exceeds the limitations of time and space. From the distance, it is easier to see the local earthly matters: funny, momentous, and thrilling. In short, Szymborska’s poetry teaches about the right measure of life and thinking. Imagination directed at the earthly community and its relationship with existence of the great cosmos opens itself to the mystery of being. We cannot get a clear message from the boundless regions of cosmic space. There is no metaphysical certainty available to us, which does not eliminate the careful listening to the silence of the universe. This approach does not reject the Supreme Causative Power or the Supreme Being, even if it were only a supposition.

In my book, I consider the issues signaled above. A few elements are especially important to me. Without describing her post-war beginnings and reflecting on

her early entanglement in socialist realist newspeak, Szymborska's mature anti-dogmatic attitude will remain unclear. We should not consider the distrustful judgment of accepted truths in her poems in separation from concrete artistic solutions. Thus, Szymborska's rhetoric and stylistics, her figures of reservation, negation, contradiction, tautology, and repetition are closely connected with the construction of the poetic world and substantially affect the shape of her messages. Thus, we cannot abandon the matters of language. After all, Wisława Szymborska is a poet of sophisticated wit, a surprising freedom of expression, and an unusual game with various literary styles, even with colloquial Polish.

The confrontations of culture and life form a separate, significant theme. Szymborska's poems about painting, theater, and music do not close in the circle of aesthetic inquiries. On the contrary, we witness there a fascinating crossing of set worldviews, the interdependence between the order of conventions and real life. Her dialog with texts of culture also includes the applied arts. Inclined to paradoxes, Szymborska shows how the preserved documents – films and photographs – do not remain faithful to facts. Her reading of testimonies is prudent and cautious. We should remember that the preserved traces give only a vague idea of the missing whole.

The dream of a better world, imagined and established in poetry, once again encounters a series of reservations. Szymborska rejects the thinking that does not reckon with reality. She does not agree for an easy, though effective, literary escapism. Any ideal vision usually appears dirtied with grotesquely contradictory episodes. It is no coincidence that Szymborska polemicizes with the assumptions of pure poetry. To create a world dependent solely on the movement of one's imagination encounters her fundamental resistance. If one cannot give in to demiurgic illusion, what remains is the correction of many existing worlds by poetic word.

# **The Beginning**



# I After the War

## The Nonexistent Debut

Debut is usually an appeal sent into the future, when the reader will commune with the whole work. The first collections of even the most excellent poets show more announcement than fulfillment, they testify to talent – not mastery. At the moment of the debut, a critical distance to one's own possibilities seems too narrow, the direction of work with the word not quite crystallized, and the styles not tried enough for the poet to avoid artistic mistakes. It is so because history interfered in artistic development by disturbing its logic. The debut in peaceful times differs from the one, when participation of poetry in registering and shaping collective attitudes seems almost unavoidable. This happens when you must describe the world after a defeat, draw up losses yet provide ideas for the future, recognize the state of people's consciousness who enter life again, develop in oneself a conviction that we rule over the unknown and unpredictable.

The debutant seeks support in the peer group. She willingly speaks on behalf of the generation. She does not think that choir performance would bring offense to the individual poet. Faith in the transformation of the world and the desire to positively influence it with word may (and does) encounter the temptation to adopt an ideology that offers a coherent set of beliefs, equips the speaker in a ready language, provides means of persuasion, and lulls doubts with mirages of power over the minds. Finally – gradually and methodically – the ideology deprives its devout believer of her unique soul.

There is a rather complicated way from searching for words to finding them:<sup>1</sup> precision and the truths of expression, artistry, and wit. The half-legendary beginnings of Wisława Szymborska's works are connected with short forms of prose, not poetry. Apart from a few references to these attempts, we know nothing. Written by Szymborska during the Second World War, they never saw daylight.<sup>2</sup> However, what is important is the result of the forgotten exercises. Already there, she wants to remove the dividing line between the lyrical form and the fray of eventicity. In poems, she eagerly reaches for an anecdote, distrustful

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1 J. Kwiatkowski, "Przedmowa," in: W. Szymborska, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1977, p. 5.

2 With one exception, which was a fleeting print in a student's one-day school. See A. Bikont, J. Szczęsna, *Pamiętkowe rupiecie. Biografia Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Kraków 1997 p. 68.

of sublime poetizations unsupported by colloquial experience. Szymborska does not value direct confessionalism, so even when creating separate worlds, she carefully observes the facts and tries to know a lot about the real world, just in case. In *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces* and the *Pocztą literacką* (Literary Post), she reveals her vast knowledge about the art of the novel and essay. The early short stories are Szymborska's first rejected opportunity of debut.

The publication of Szymborska's first poem came just after the disaster. The war was still in progress, when in the third issue of *Walka* (Struggle) appeared in March 1945 with her lyric "Szukam słowa."<sup>3</sup> *Walka* and the one-day *Inaczej* (Otherwise; published September 1945) gathered young writers, including Tadeusz Kubiak, Stanisław Lem, Jerzy Lovell, Wilhelm Mach, Adam Włodek, and Wisława Szymborska.<sup>4</sup> This literary supplement was the first to offer poetic texts by the unknown debutant. Szymborska later wrote about the circle of *Walka's* collaborators, "It was my first literary milieu, here I began to seriously consider writing poetry for the first time."<sup>5</sup> As it turned out, *Walka* was one of the short-lived journals: it only came out for a few months in the first half of 1945 only to expire after seventeen issues.<sup>6</sup> After the liquidation of *Walka* – a typical practice of the PRL cultural policy – there emerged new titles and literary supplements. In the period until the Szczecin convention of Związek Literatów Polskich (ZLP; Union of Polish Writers), in January 1949, Szymborska published among others in *Świątlica Cracowska* (Cracow Community Center), *Dziennik Literacki* (Literary Daily), *Odrodzenie* (Rebirth), *Pokolenie* (Generation).

Noteworthy, besides cultural magazines, Koło Młodych (Youth Circle) at the Cracow ZLP branch served as a forum and creative writing school important for the shaping of poetic awareness. At her beginnings, Szymborska was inspired by Julian Przyboś, Czesław Miłosz, and Jerzy Zagórski, who were actively involved

3 The editors of this supplement to *Dziennik Polski*, Adam Włodek and Tadeusz Jęczalik, significantly shortened and edited Szymborska's work *Jacy* (How They Are), even by changing the original title (A. Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," in: *Nasz łup wojenny. Pamiętnikarski aneks do dziejów literackiego startu wojennego pokolenia pisarzy Cracowskich*, Kraków 1970, pp. 147–150). Also see P. Małochleb, "'Świat po bajce jest siny', czyli Szymborska po wojnie," in: *Widnokreśli literatury – wielogłosy krytyki. Prace ofiarowane Profesor Teresie Walas*, eds. T. Kunz, A. Łebkowska, R. Nycz, M. Popiel, Kraków 2015, pp. 381–388.

4 Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," p. 302.

5 *Dziennik Polski* 20/1955 [mention about Wisława Szymborska on the tenth anniversary of this magazine].

6 Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," pp. 128–129.



in the contemporary literary life of Cracow, as sources of inspiration – the poets admired by Szymborska. The acquisition of poetics does not imply its rewriting, even though Szymborska's early poems show the artistic rigor of construction, original metaphor, conciseness of expression, and refined word games. The avant-garde approach of Przyboś was adopted here freely, not as the only way of writing.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, we find elements of the second avant-garde in Szymborska's historiosophical and moral reflections along with poetic stories about a fulfilled catastrophe.

Pierwsze utwory Wisławy Szymborskiej, przy całej ich artystycznej odrębności, wpisywały się w rozleglejszy kontekst spraw istotnych dla rówieśników przyszłej noblistki. Owa zgodność z głosem zbiorowym obejmowała pytania zadawane czasem, jak i podobne rozwiązania formalne. Jacek Łukasiewicz zasadnie wyodrębnił "syntetyczny liryczny podmiot" – własność wspólną wskazanej generacji. Oto rozpoznane przez badacza cechy istotne poetyki zbiorowej:

With all their artistic distinctiveness, Szymborska early works fit into the larger context of matters important for her peer group. This compliance with collective voice included questioning their times and similar formal solutions. Jacek Łukasiewicz aptly distinguishes the "synthetic lyrical subject"<sup>8</sup> as the common property of Szymborska's generation:

The subject's in the poems from *Walka* ... is or wants to be modern ... inspired by an anti-aristocratic tradition and the desire to take advantage of the chance of social advancement (to the elite of artistic intelligence). Simultaneously, this subject is clearly defined by the generational experience of war.<sup>9</sup>

To develop the heritage of the Cracow avant-garde meant the ideological orientation to the left. The young poets were not fully aware of the extent of political manipulation at the time. The long-run plan for subordinating culture to the communist authorities was not clearly visible at first. Support for the relatively liberal slogans of by the Czytelnik publishing house (more radical than *Dziennik Polski* was *Kuźnica*) initially resembled nothing like a devil's contract.

Szymborska's poems published in periodicals from the 1940s never came to life as a separate book. She did not announce the finished volume of poems

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7 For more, see A. Zarzycka, *Rewolucja Szymborskiej 1945–1957. O wczesnej twórczości poetki na tle epoki*, Poznań 2010, pp. 99–112, who aptly argues that Szymborska's dialog with Przyboś's poetics meant no imitation or influence.

8 J. Łukasiewicz, "Wiersz wewnątrz gazety," *Teksty Drugie* 4/1991, p. 11.

9 Łukasiewicz, "Wiersz wewnątrz gazety," pp. 11–12.

entitled *Szycie sztandaru* (Sewing the Banner).<sup>10</sup> However, there appeared the reconstruction of the debut book *Czarna piosenka* (The Black Song; 2014) – after many years – edited and introduced by Joanna Szczęsna. Its editorial form was more or less handed over in Szyborska’s old tables of contents, although we will never know for sure what her final decisions would be.<sup>11</sup> The first period of Szyborska’s work ends with a discussion about her poem “Niedziela w szkole” (Sunday at School) which mainly focused on ideological explanations (whether “a shepherd from Kazakhstan” will understand avant-garde metaphors).<sup>12</sup> Led by a Polish language teacher, students from the Rzeszów high school accused Szyborska of incomprehensibility.

Anna Zarzycka shows that Szyborska’s *Szycie sztandaru*, the basis for her entry to the ZLP, was ready only in the middle of 1950 and not – as researchers previously assumed – in 1949.<sup>13</sup> The reasons for Szyborska’s delay of printing remain unknown. However, during the intensifying offensive of Stalinism and after the implementation of the imported doctrine of socialist realism, there could no longer appear a volume with ambiguous overtones, mixed emotive qualities, and named fears. Individual sensitivity combined with a talent for observation and a difficult artistic form contained suspicious undertones, which precluded the volume to become part of newspaper propaganda.

Of course, backward divination is an absurd activity. We cannot project the position of a nonexistent debut in the poetical hierarchy of that time. Szyborska’s would-be debut would probably not go unnoticed. A book less radical in the search for a new language to express war traumas than Różewicz’s *Niepokój*, Szyborska’s collection would significantly strengthen the position of the young poets. The other thing is that our present perspective is inept because of her great success, which undoubtedly affects the way of reading as her later great books shine their light on the humble beginnings. Initially developed at

- 10 First information about this was provided by Tadeusz Drewnowski, see Bikont, Szczęsna, *Pamiętkowe rupiecie*, p. 78; Zarzycka, *Rewolucja Szyborskiej*, pp. 39–40. Małochleb, “Świat po bajce jest siny,” p. 383, called this “tom-widmo,” a phantom volume.
- 11 J. Szczęsna, “Pisałam wiersze, piszę wiersze i mam zamiar pisać wiersze,” in: W. Szyborska, *Czarna piosenka*, Kraków 2014, pp. 12–23. There remains a table of contents prepared by A. Włodek, see Szyborska, *Czarna piosenka*, pp. 82–84.
- 12 For more, see A. Włodek, “Debiut z przygodami,” pp. 159–163; J. Łukasiewicz, “Wiersz wewnątrz gazety,” pp. 25–28. S. Żak also recapitulates the debate in his “Wisława Szyborska,” in: *Polscy pisarze nobliści*, Kielce 1998, pp. 226–230.
- 13 A. Zarzycka, *Rewolucja Szyborskiej*, p. 52 ff.

that time, Szymborska's style could not return until after the turn of October 1956, but it returned transformed and improved.

## Inscription of Experience

The problem of how to record the experience of war gained utmost clarity in the first poem published by Szymborska, "Szukam słowa" (I Am Looking for a Word). After the war and historical change, the earlier practice of artistic speech appeared insufficient. Like Tadeusz Różewicz, Szymborska faced her own anxiety. The main tasks of young Cracow poets after the Second World War included no arranging of funerals, contemplation of ruins, admiration of heroic myths, or proud rejection of reality. Their literary program gathered attitudes and norms of behavior, traumatic memory and work on a poetic word adapted to current needs. There opened up a new part of time, which required sensible management. The past destroyed by the war offered nothing apart from horror and terror. The acceptance of historical necessity even then, in 1945, did not involve intrusive ideological agitation.

To overcome war's effects that settled in human consciousness and rebuild faith in the future were no simple tasks, devoid of contradictions and drama. Szymborska's attempts vividly show the many antinomies of meanings and various collapses of poetic diction. The threshold moment in history releases agitated emotions and is counterproductive to calmed reflection, thus working against the development of classical poetics. As Anna Legeżyńska argues, "Szymborska divides time into the dark <yesterday> and the full of hope <today>, she initiates the imagery of wartime destruction and the imagery of building."<sup>14</sup> Noteworthy, Szymborska operates with semantic tensions between the word and the reality, between collective optimism and personal sadness.

Szymborska settles with wartime disaster in two ways, namely by dealing with the issue of ungrateful historical education in times of horror and taking responsibility for the emerging post-war order, with which she attempts to integrate the broken consciousness. On the other hand, there surfaces a separate creative imagination in Szymborska. Often, the reader is surprised by the originality of her perception, literary images, and verbal associations. The innovation of her solutions sometimes significantly deviates from the prevalent patterns of her generation.

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14 A. Legeżyńska, *Wisława Szymborska*, Poznań 1996, pp. 12–13.

The closest to the avant-garde is Szymborska's poem "Pamięć o wrześniu" (Remembrance of September). This is indicated by factors that specify meanings, like the arrangement of metaphorical images, elliptical syntax, and the rhythm of questions. The roads of Polish autumn, full of war refugees, become arteries that not only carry the blood of fallen heroes but also the military and civilian exodus. And if there is a hemorrhage, we must hurry with the dressing: "who will block the roads,/and with what bandage?" (CP 44). Simultaneously, we must block the painful memory of the events of September 1939, which resembles a wound. There is a colloquial expression "to have a bleeding heart." How large would the bandage have to be to heal all Polish wounds? A similar metaphor appears in one of Julian Przyboś's wartime poems "Nad poległym powstańcem" (Over a Fallen Insurgent).

In Przyboś's piece, the "participatory" street scenography becomes part of the bloody drama of Warsaw Uprising: "these are the burning streets of Warsaw/over the wounded and armed, fighting to death/they unfold banners of battlefields:/the neverending bloody bandage."<sup>15</sup> Przyboś, the poet of the avant-garde, exposes his sympathetic symbolic presence in the tragically struggling capital of Poland, whereas Szymborska's poem shows the episode as closed, while the problem of shattered consciousness remains.

The dead time of war disrupts the natural world. Destruction is inconceivable on the microcosmic scale. The light touch of the world in the moment of hard historical experiences creates a disturbingly strange disproportion: "Why is ... the face touched as if it was a leaf/by a leaf knocked off by an explosion?" ("Pamięć o wrześniu," CP 44). Such a peripheral point of view surprisingly violates the accepted methods of familiarizing facts. Perhaps the leaf falls on the eyelids of a fallen insurgent? Szymborska's "Pamięć o wrześniu" is thick with meanings, full of understatements, and filled with reading suggestions. The relationships between the images that remain in memory are breaking up. The speaker endows the post-September battle landscape with psychic properties, while the object of description is an equal partner of people as witnesses of history.

Szymborska 1940s poetry reserves the most important place for the history of consciousness, which surface specifically as an unpleasant, premature maturity:

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15 J. Przyboś, *Utwory poetyckie. Tom pierwszy*, Kraków 1984, p. 218 (poem from the volume *Póki my żyjemy*; So Long As We Still Live): "to płonące ulice Warszawy/nad rannymi, walczącymi o śmierć z bronią/rozwijają flagi pobjowisk:/nieskończony skrwawiony bandaż".

Our wartime loot is knowledge of the world,  
 – it is so large it fits in two clasped hands,  
 so hard that a smile does to describe it,  
 so strange, like old truths echoing in prayers  
 (“Once we had the world backwards and forwards,” UP 3).

The expression “wartime loot” alludes to the winner, which is obviously ironic. Not much is gained, and a lot is lost in war. Instead, one learns from war a special knowledge that the world became complicated while the “old” myths and values lost their explanatory power. The school of history provided us with sad experiences. It is significant that Szyborska begins with “educational rhetoric,”<sup>16</sup> the preparation of a register what knowledge may be useful in adult life. Her disarming of the colloquial (school time) metaphor “to know backwards and forwards” comes from the exploitation of its literal meaning. We now know fragments – *wryrywki* in Polish original – of the world, which before the war were enough to understand the rules of naive life. However, simple-minded scholars now face a difficult exam because they will be questioned from the whole that is taking shape right this moment.

Szyborska accentuates the word “history.” To be educated by history borders on cruelty. Nothing positive comes from such lessons. On the contrary, history offers poisonous food: fears and defeats. “It flung dirty sand into our eyes” (CP 31) and made us wander on “roads leading nowhere” (CP 31). This phrase refers us to the Polish proverb “biednemu tylko wiatr w oczy”<sup>17</sup> (when it rains, it pours), but we may also think of Morpheus’s mind-numbing magic. Misfortune works lethargically, as the ignoble matter of history makes us close our eyes and not see.

The aphasia of poetic speech and problems with shifting vision onto new historical realities converge in another poem by Szyborska: “Pamięć o styczniu” (Remembrance of January). This piece offers more fear and dark premonitions than enthusiasm. At least this is how memory recorded January 18, 1945, when Marshal Ivan Konev entered Cracow at the head of the Red Army. We see here a mixture of withdrawal and engagement, reserve and joy that creates a true testimony because the Polish situation of the end of the war is ungraspable.

A city with a new décor and flapping flags becomes only a task for the poetic word perception:

Our lips are distand from words.  
 Our eyes received a new city:

16 See E. Balcerzan, “W szkole świata,” *Teksty Drugie* 4/1991, p. 39 ff.

17 For more, see the detailed consideration of colloquial metaphors and loan translations in this poem in T. Nyczek, pp. 14–15.

banners swarming over the crowd,  
rubble, convulsive ironware (CP 45).

Let us emphasize the unique construction of the image of parading banners. The agitational props appear surprisingly light: they rose above the thrones, happily fluttered over enthusiastic crowds, but never did they “swarm.” Banners usually covered battlefields (real or imagined) than allowed “iron pyres” to dramatically speak, as Tadeusz Borowski wrote. The banners swarming over ironware abandoned by the army does not form a transparent formation. How distant is this description from those of banners in socialist realist literature like Szymborska’s “Pokój?”

### The Incomplete Joy of Reconstruction

In the poems under discussion, Szymborska often expresses the awareness of wartime events in a rather complicated poetic syntax, in avant-garde formulas of considerable condensation of meaning. However, the multiplicity of poetic figures does not serve generational programs well. Only explicit expressions achieve clarity and persuasive effectiveness. In Szymborska’s manifesto, the political and historical macroscale encounters everyday concrete that create the vision of a peaceful, safe life. The poetic theme of the beginning receives support from the generational “we.” After the war, the goals of collective endeavors are determined in this way:

for the smoke from red chimney  
for the book used read fear  
for a piece of a clear sky  
we struggle (“O coś więcej;” For Something More; CP 25).

The landscape is not very tasteful, but that is not the point. Smoke that does not cover “clear sky” means not a threat, but the possibility to inhabit the world. An openly read book expresses the freedom of choice of texts that only recently were prohibited by the occupier.

The concrete and symbolic reconstruction of the world requires a gesture of farewell to national martyrology. It is worth to start again, because this is what the instinct of life dictates:

Our eyes are tired with fresh memory,  
but hands know, believe.  
The hands with which we are to lift the weight of the world  
they know: the world will be born again without the specter’s of war (“Krucjata dzieci;” Children’s Crusade CP 27).

The eyes are tired with images of catastrophe, while the hands assume restorative action. For the latter to be constructive, one must renounce a part of the experience and reject the memory of collective sacrifice. However, one cannot disregard the loss of so many victims, like the eleven-year-old soldiers who fought in the Warsaw Uprising. Association with such sacred and simultaneously futile matter as the defeat of the Children's Crusade in 1212, which departed from France and Germany to retrieve the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem, is all too eloquent. The activist attitude should relinquish exalted mythology. The lyric "Dzieci wojny" (The Children of War) belongs to the same semantic scope. Indeed, the remembered trauma cannot be removed with even the fieriest speeches. Therefore, the burden of war experience becomes part of the community who enters the new period of history.

In the early poems, Szymborska sometimes abandons the grammatical plural. The acceptance of collective duties is not the only and exclusive attitude. Hence, the tone of poetry is different, which foregrounds personal experience. Traumatic memory revives the recent past. Perhaps in "Janko Muzykant" (Johnny the Musician), composed of fragments series of "four poems about the parting of lovers,"<sup>18</sup> the private rite of the grandfathers is fulfilled: magic, charms, summoning a loved one from the land of the dead. The very restrained epitaph for "the memory of the fallen," situated beyond heroic poetic narration, says little about the hero, for a full lyrical confession is not an option. Feelings of anger and hatred do not accuse cruel history but are shifted and aimed at the ordinary course of things in nature, the fresh green of trees, and the defiant joy of sunlight, as in the much later poem "Parting with a View" from the volume *The End and the Beginning*. One should cease on the mismatch of the tormenting wait and the rhythm of the regenerating nature. The style of indirect suggestion disallows closer confidences.

The poem "Powrót żalu" (The Return of Sorrow) announces the later, artistically excellent "Dream" (from the volume *Salt*),<sup>19</sup> as well as "Parting with a View," so as to markedly employ the poetics of lyrical discretion. The object here is disinheritance from landscape, the inability to return to the place where the hero died:

I will not recognize the forest.  
I will not find the sign in the sky.  
The sky and the forest with stitches of salvos  
were sewn to death (CP 67).

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18 Małochleb, "Świat po bajce jest siny," pp. 385–386.

19 A. Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," p. 154.

The connotation of the word “death” is extraordinary here. The landscape did not survive death and ceased to exist for the speaker. Everything has changed from the indicated caesura. The indifferent landscape seems incomplete and untrustworthy. Its fault lies in its similarity to other landscapes, without any signs of mourning, without any inscribed words of commemoration. The earth and the sky cannot testify and, in a way, renounce the event. This is why they were “sewn to death” irrevocably and finally. You can no longer enter the forest of the past.

The past is inhabited by fears, while the future is connected with collective goodwill and faith. Is the present in the above poems too uncertain to write about it, too amorphous to give it form? Or maybe it is not suitable for optimistic fittings? Luckily, Szymborska does not neglect direct observation. The miserable post-war life continues unaltered, the biographies and human fate are marked mostly by misfortune. This is what Szymborska notices. A simple experiment of escape from the reality – for example into the world of film fiction – creates moments of “not-seeing,” paradoxically necessary for us to properly see. Beautiful dreams are quickly interrupted, while fairy tales with good endings never happen in ordinary life. The space of return is specific and – not beautiful:

I'm coming back to you, the real world,  
crowded, dark, and full of fate –  
you, one-armed boy beneath the gate  
you, empty eyes of a young girl (“Leaving the Movie Theater;” UP 4).

The sophisticated title of the film, “The moon’s husk glimmered for two hours” (UP 4), means scales that cover the eyes from truth (in a Polish proverb), an unreal underwater fish world, and illusionary stories from the moon – all of which contrast with the images on the street. Let us emphasize that destructive history as the modern incarnation of fate has a special gift for producing mutilated people. Moreover, the judgment of history immediately connects here with concrete emphasized by the address to the other person, called upon and noticed. This is how Szymborska gradually fulfills her project of solidarist poetry.

We cannot overlook the empathy of Szymborska’s post-war poems. As a counterbalance of the joyous version of reality, the speaker identifies herself with an old woman that collects lumps of coal on the street and foretells herself the future of “a witch/blue/from the frost” (“Linia życia;” The Line of Life; CP 54). It will soon be distasteful in Poland to care for individuals left on the side track of life.

Szymborska doubly valorizes the expectation for a new period of times, as in the passage from the cycle “Z Autobiografii Dnia” (From the Autobiography of Day): “Stretched are – fear and hope –/in a fleeting shiver of the sun” (the poem



“Nie z trybuny i ambon...;” CP 41). However, this limit of times often triggers anxiety. As we read in the aphoristically shaped verse from eponymous poem of the unpublished volume *Czarna piosenka*, “Black Song:” “The future – who can guess it. The past – who’s got it right?” (UP 6). This transition from horror to normalcy (is it normalcy?) seems equally elusive. An ordinary day may appear at the level of particulate facts and individual anecdotes. But what do they relate to? What do they mean? Everyday stories reveal a thin line between the memory of a nightmare and the joy of oblivion. It is not even possible to distinguish the staging of dying from the actual death. The asemantic language of music better than words expresses the intermediate quality (joyless laughter, sorrowful play), which is like “cold and heat” mixed in a dancing room (“Black Song;” UP 6).

Normal, nonheroic death in a dancing room is something inappropriate for the partygoers, since we managed to survive the war and now have an ambiguous time of fun. According to the well-known Polish tradition reminiscent of Stanisław Wyspiański’s play *Wesele* (The Wedding; 1901), dance expresses here the paradox of freezing in movement: indifference and numbness. Jazz music<sup>20</sup> lulls sensitivity as an answer to the ill-fated situation. In this understanding, the “black song” includes both the American roots of jazz and the catastrophic announcements of collective history. In a descriptive sentence, Szymborska captures the ghastliness in the ordinary: “the saxophone howled lika dog to a pink lantern” (“Black Song,” UP 6).

Along with raw normalcy, the element of everyday speech enters Szymborska’s poetry. Let us consider her poems about Warsaw. On the ruins of a devastated city, life grows vigorously, and unbridled vitality finds its outlet in commerce. The poem “Miejsce na pomnik” (A Place for a Monument; part of the *Wędrówki* cycle) delegates a slightly mysterious boy-resonator, probably a poet, to observe these spontaneous ways of filling the emptiness. This poetic reportage shows simultaneous actions in the quickly organized space of the post-war Warsaw. The vision of the monumental “stone music” of the future is not as interesting as the few scenes described with a talent for realism:

Chubby snotnose  
 commends vodka and cherry...  
 The young boy with a flash of a signet ring  
 dollars praises dollars (CP 59)

The cycle *Wędrówki* (Journeys), the boy is a watchful observer of the reviving life. What the texts foreground is that this seeker of truth and “passerby of places and

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20 For more, see Zarzycka, *Rewolucja Szymborskiej*.

days” (“Wymiary;” Dimensions; CP 62) “was allied with no one” (“Ulica Polna;” Polna Street; CP 57). It is not political rationale but observation combined with intuitive guessing of the future that counts most in this strategy of recovering the world. Exactly in the side alleys of the resurrecting city “the living grow in numbers” (CP 58) to again participate in everyday events.

In turn, the 1946 poem “List na Zachód” (A Letter West; another title “Zwycięstwo;” Victory) carefully motivates interest in what is authentic. A novella in few verses came to be for persuasive reasons. This time, Szymborska reaches for the convention of a letter to emigrants that is to persuade them to return. One should avoid an idealized bland painting, which plays on sentiments to create an emblem of homeland. Instead, we should seek something unusual, for instance:

Here, a red-elbowed rascal  
with patched pants  
flings his foot on a pile of building materials  
and cocks a snook at you.  
Instead of saying: at first, there was fire.  
Instead of saying: at first, there was rubble (CP 49).

Early on, Szymborska revealed a weakness for tramps. A reckless individual who programmatically want to remember nothing bad is somewhat reminiscent of a similar figure from the volume *The End and the Beginning*, who after every war, lays in the grass and looks at the sky. The difference is that the tramp above has a specific mission to fulfill. The thing happens at a construction site, where joyful creation will begin. A playful and aggressive gesture sent to Western doubters successfully exorcises any attachment to the tragic past. The cheerful plebeian pantomime appears instead of a lofty recitation. Everyday language displaces the solemn rhetoric of defeat. An ordinary tramp is not a propagandist, so we may trust him. Nevertheless, history proved that the emigrants’ return after the Second World War to Poland ruled by communists did not end happily.

## **An Opening to the Future**

Szymborska’s early writing shows several tendencies. Most often, she chooses three poetics: post-catastrophic, avant-garde, and realist. Szymborska arranges her early poems in cycles, exposing the epic element next to the lyrical (“Janko Muzykant,” “Z Autobiografii Dnia,” “Wędrówki”). “Niedziela w szkole” approaches the size of a long poem. At the end, we read significant words: “it is time to develop what passed/into an epic. This one is not here yet” (CP 81). With time, Szymborska abandons a panoramic look at the issues of the community as the gaze of the individual clearly begins to dominate.

The diagnosis of the consciousness of twenty-year-old poets who survived the war encounters a personal reckoning that Szyborska conducts discreetly, encrypted in a language of metaphors and images. In Szyborska's poems, tragic memory stops enthusiasm. Besides spelling the future, appealing, and persuading, the word that rebuilds the world after the defeat reveals dark overtones that express regret, confusion, and uncertainty. We cannot silence the legacy of the disaster. It would be one-sided to only create mirages of future collective happiness. Therefore, when undertaking the task of "lifting" the new reality, Szyborska remembers its various shapes and manifestations. She even corrects the optimism of her generation, as if the promises of a change of fate were exaggerated. Both the memory of war experience and first-hand post-war testimonies – which question the desired beautiful order – eliminate myths and oppose propagandist illusions.

Generational experiences create a psychological and literary background; but in the best of Szyborska's early works, this background almost completely disappears. In "Pamięć o wrześniu," "Pamięć o styczeniu," "Black Song," and "Leaving the Movie Theater," we notice the features of poetics that will be the hallmarks of Szyborska's art. Let us only list here the colloquial freedom of speech, the breaking up and delexicalization of phraseological relationships, the paradoxes, and the clash of discourse with anecdotes. There even appears the matter of poetic expression, whose word cannot fully convey the novelty of experiences, like in the contradiction between anxiety and approval. This is how Szyborska appraises the literary language that commemorates the victims of the war: "what I write –/is too little./Too little//Powerless is our speech" ("Szukam słowa," CP 29). The new reality that emerges from chaos still surprises. Therefore, amazement as the basic reaction to the world, so important for Szyborska's mature work, appears in a short definition in the poem "Szycie sztandaru:" "each poem/goes by the name Amazement" (CP 61).

Adam Włodek rightly claims that Szyborska reworked and refined her early ideas in later volumes<sup>21</sup> published after October 1956: "Szyborska will reach for motifs, threads, themes, and images as if to a treasury [of early works]." Just compare her "Transport Żydów" (Transport of Jews) with "Still" (from *Calling Out to Yeti*), the cycle *Janko Muzykant* with lyrics "Dream" (from *Salt*) and "Parting with a View" (from *The End and the Beginning*), "Ballada dzisiaj" (Ballad Today) with poems "Buffo" (*Calling Out to Yeti*), "Shadow" and "Ballad" (*Sól*).<sup>22</sup> The

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21 Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," p. 154.

22 Włodek, "Debiut z przygodami," p. 20.

described line of her striving for a more perfect form is interrupted by ideological indentured servitude under Stalinism. From the early post-war poems there remained but one piece in Szymborska's socialist realist debut *Why We Live* (1952): "Pocałunek nieznanego żołnierza" (The Kiss of an Unknown Soldier).

As we considered above, Szymborska's poetry open her path to the creative joy of reconstruction only partially, as they are subject to reservations and perceived in the shadow of sadness. What shapes the image of the post-war years free from the ideological oppression of Stalinism in Szymborska's works are hopes and resentments, a constructive vision of the future and the sufferings of the past, a distanced separate reflection and the presence of the "voice of the era." This variety of attitudes and poetic assessments finds correspondence in the diversity of genres that she utilizes: from threnody through reportage to a hymn for the brave new world. The stylistic key also changes. The scale stretches between avant-garde metaphor and a matter-of-fact poetic tale, devoid of ornaments. Szymborska gives priority to none of the existing patterns. What we witness is the mark of trial and error. The certainty of her poetic hand sometimes fluctuates. Nevertheless, we may claim with no exaggeration that Szymborska's scattered poems as records of experience belong to the most penetrating testimonies in Polish poetry of the early post-war period.

**Without Revision**



## II Embroiled in Newspeak

### Ideological Faith

The doctrine of socialist realism imported from the USSR – recommended at the January 1949 literary congress in Szczecin and gradually implemented – deprived artists of the freedom to create their own worlds and assess reality. According to the doctrine, writers should praise the “great epoch” and party’s wisdom, admit only the proletarian and revolutionary past, and confirm the belief that work is the supreme value. Hence, what was necessary was the admiration of large constructions.

If poetry was to act as agitation, then its typical themes and literary ways of expression became impoverished. The subtle shades of meanings disappeared, while the plastic language poetry was replaced by one persuasively effective. Art experiments were negatively defined as formalism, while writers-aestheticians were excommunicated by official literary criticism. Another devastation was caused by a retreat from the great Western literature. Old literary conventions and genres proved useful but, due to their propaganda functions, they were assimilated in a simplified manner. In a word, socialist realism brought the destruction of ambitious literature.

Socialist realism was in truth a utopian realism. The paradox was that what was given as a description of existing reality turned out to its idealization. Artists presented a world that should be and that was to appear in the uncertain future. Every day, people experienced something completely different from what they read in socialist realist fables but, after all, the officially-fueled enthusiasm disallowed observations of the dark sides of reality.

The enemy theory was prevalent: people of “alien class” and representatives of the “imperialist” West wanted to destroy the order built by the state under communism. The sustained situation of threat helped the authorities. The Orwellian “hours of hatred” became part of the socialist realist literary rites. The writer was to constantly accuse, intervene, stigmatize, and show vigilance. Such play of meanings stiffens and freezes in repetitive appeals, protests, and lectures.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, literature was to prepare joyful rituals and create the impression

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23 For more, see M. Głowiński, *Nowomowa po polsku*, Warszawa 1991; *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzyście szkiców o sztuce zdegenerowanej*, Warszawa 1992; along with his entries in *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego*, ed. Z. Łapiński, W. Tomasiak, Kraków 2004.

of an ongoing feast, while the literary word was subordinated to a specific magic that, through a series of spells, transformed reality.

After the wartime devastation, people needed to believe in something. Wartime knowledge about the world began to change with the introduction of Stalinism. The Communist Party of Poland proclaimed its infallibility by strengthening verbal persuasion with terror. The pluralism of ideas ended, what began was Stalinist monopoly in all areas of life, also in culture. The writer's received few possibilities to continue their work. They could either work for the authorities or become mute. Set aside fear and conformism, especially the young authors of that time perceived the only imposed truth to be attractive: it sounded noble and promised a just social order. Besides, it was nice to know the answers to all possible questions. The doubts of an individual were replaced by deified collective wisdom.

For the service in the bad case of communist propaganda, which pretended to be good, artists had to pay a high price when applying – and in the future. With the advent of the socialist realist doctrine, the absolutist language of power excluded the understanding of literature as an aesthetic play of verbal acts as records of individual experience. Therefore, socialist realism took away the most important achievements and reflections of writers. As the specialist in the language of the time, Michał Głowiński, puts it:

To właśnie nowomowa miała się uplasować ponad wszystkimi typami języka, jakie mogły się w dziele literackim pojawić, miała nad nimi zapanować, a w pewnych przypadkach – pełnić rolę swego rodzaju metajęzyka, którym mówi się o innych językach, z natury rzeczy pozbawionych ideologicznej słuszności.<sup>24</sup>

The domination of newspeak devoured the diversity of styles, eliminated differences between individualities, and made writers serve apprenticeship under party ideologues. Literature was an imperfect exegesis of official speeches, a failed copy of a newspaper, a lecture of Marxist-Leninist teachings for the little ones. Literature illustrated ready-made theses, repeated slogans, but always remained a crippled creation. Full initiation into the ideology remained mostly inaccessible. The writer and reader underwent continuous re-education. Servant literature perpetuated the only permitted truth about the world, but also served to delimit cultural space so that other truths would not penetrate inside. Literary works echoed the voice of the infallible Party – usually written with a capital letter – were produced by neophytes and apprentices, even if they happened to

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24 M. Głowiński, "Literatura wobec nowomowy," in: *Nowomowa po polsku*, Warszawa 1991, p. 45.



be outstanding artists in the previous incarnations. Undoubtedly, “The process in the history of literature called socialist realism was a liquidation of literature in the previous understanding of the word.”<sup>25</sup>

The agitator should not have used too complicated forms of expression, because complex meaning in speeches for the “masses of people” was one of the main offenses. Hence, he simplified the poetics and repurposed old literary conventions.<sup>26</sup> The socialist realist was mostly condemned to repeating propaganda clichés. Indeed, inventiveness was tolerated, but only when the writer invented good illustrations for the current ideological line, proposed at appropriate conventions and plena. Unnecessary talent could find its purpose in finding clever rhetorical arguments for the theses coming from the command center.

We should not forget about the other side of the situation of a writer embroiled in socialist realism. The magical spells that this sorcerer’s apprentice received could give one the illusion of immense power. It was easy for the writer to lose perspective and seriously assume the role of the “soul engineer.”<sup>27</sup> To believe in the mass reader. To be sure that megacirculation newspapers and books guarantee long-range coverage and effectiveness. But such perfect communication was also only an idea of the propaganda.

The issue of social realist myths and rituals has been well recognized by literary scholars and critics. This ceremonial side of literary speeches was subordinated to the “communist liturgical calendar”<sup>28</sup> or the rhythm of holidays, anniversaries, and jubilees. The writers described events from the first pages of newspapers, but paper involvement was insufficient, because the writer had to partake in unending celebrations of life, go to the field, show up, and represent. The ritual extended to all forms of artistic and nonartistic messages. The literary socialist realism treated the word magically. The perpetual adoration of communist saints continued, but ordinary people also received part of divinity on ordinary days. If any events were worth describing, they must have received the sign of struggle and heroism.

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25 Z. Łapiński, *Jak współżyć z socrealizmem. Szkice nie na temat*, Londyn 1988, p. 95.

26 See E. Balcerzan, “Strategia agitatora,” in: *Polska poezja w latach 1939–1965. Część I: Strategie liryczne*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 159–160.

27 See Z. Jarosiński, “Literatura jako władza,” in: *Nadwiślanski socrealizm*, Warszawa 1999.

28 M. Głowiński, “Poezja i rytuał (wiersze na sześćdziesiąte urodziny Bolesława Bieruta),” in: *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzyście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 105–109.

In poems from two collections, *Why We Live* (1952) and *Questions You Ask Yourself* (1954), Szymborska assumes socialist realist poetics. By restraining individual artistic sensitivity and removing the need for searching, she reduces the multidimensional truth about the world. As we know, the doctrine of socialist realism limited the scope of literary themes and techniques. After all, the “ideological empire”<sup>29</sup> with headquarters in Moscow sought full control over the minds, the social life, attitude, behavior, and words. In both volumes Szymborska pays tribute to this ideology; with zeal, conviction, and sometimes the fanaticism of youth. Although Szymborska learned the rhetoric of socialist realism well, we may sometimes see attempts to bypass the powerful and possessive newspeak.

What mattered in literature at that time was not beauty, but the agitational effectiveness. And yet, besides the dictate of the “alien word” and reproduction of cognitive schemes that forbade own reflection, we still find original solutions in Szymborska’s poems from the Stalinist era – supported by her literary craftsmanship. Because not everything in socialist realist literature was controlled. There were holes in the system. Despite their hard work, the doctrine’s legislators and critics who raised poets could not create a complete set of meticulous literary rules. As Teresa Wilkoń metaphorically puts it: “The fierce debates of the time prove that the socialist realist corset showed cracks.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the innovative approach is the result of the honesty of Szymborska’s choice. In any case, even a substitute for artistic risk does not seem to be the same as pure conformism. In the volumes *Why We Live* and *Questions You Ask Yourself*, we notice a series of deviations-surprises that appear in the subject, style, image, metaphors that we may still enjoy. Szymborska can manage the very narrow margin of creative freedom for the benefit of her artistic expression. The overcoming of clichés is more evident in the second collection, *Questions You Ask Yourself*, which appeared in print after Stalin’s death, when political change began to hatch and schematism seemed to weaken. That is when she avoids the front line of ideological front. In short, Wisława Szymborska was not an exemplary socialist realist.

## The Legacy of Socialist Realism and the Critics

Scope, boundaries, artistic value, aesthetic and ideological consequences – opinions vary in all of these specific issues concerning Szymborska’s socialist

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29 Term introduced by A. Friszke, “Państwo Polskie – autonomiczna część imperium,” in: *Spór o PRL*, Kraków 1996, p. 111.

30 T. Wilkoń, *Polska poezja socrealistyczna w latach 1949–1955*, Gliwice 1992, p. 12.

realism. Let us quote a few selected opinions. First, about her compatibility with the paradigm. Right after October 1956, Ryszard Matuszewski confides to the readers that, from the old delight in Szymborska's verse there only remains the impression of cold, smooth essays on a given subject.<sup>31</sup> Tadeusz Nyczek recognizes Szymborska's poems from the first two volumes as "clinical examples of the creative tastes of the era."<sup>32</sup> Stanisław Balbus distinguishes between Szymborska's works from that time: "most of them actually were ... the expression engaged socialist poetry and symptoms of the ideological seduction of very young and ardent person. With a few notable exceptions, [her poetry] smuggled a special personal tone and – visible already then – notes of self-irony."<sup>33</sup> Janusz Drzewucki extends the area of revindication: "We should remember about the two early collections [by Szymborska], probably too recklessly considered socialist realist."<sup>34</sup>

Now let us observe the evaluation of Szymborska's poetic value at that time. Artur Sandauer writes, "Indeed, her two first volumes are like all the rest of the production of the times – oh! – they are ... even worse."<sup>35</sup> Jan Błoński declares that, "On the backdrop of the lyric of the times, one could read Szymborskis without reluctance."<sup>36</sup> Piotr Michałowski says that, "Szymborska's voice sounds ... like solo coloratura in the choir for the masses."<sup>37</sup> Joanna Trzeciak's phrase develops upon the musical metaphors with her statement, that "the socialist propaganda [in Szymborska's poetry] resembles chamber music."<sup>38</sup>

Did anything permanent remain in Szymborska's above poems after the socialist realist writing episode? Sometimes the lesson is indirect. As Anna Legeżyńska argues, a Szymborska's "fruitful mistake" in the 1950s left in her

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31 R. Matuszewski, "Wołanie do Yeti," *Nowa Kultura* 40/1957.

32 T. Nyczek, "O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Miesięcznik Literacki* 3/1974, p. 59. Also see his remarks about Szymborska's literary rule "W prostym stylu prosta treść," in: *22 x Szymborska*, Poznań 1997, p. 20.

33 S. Balbus, "Świat ze wszystkich stron świata. O Wisławie Szymborskiej" in: W. Szymborska, *Dwadzieścia jeden wierszy*, Kraków 1996, pp. 16–17.

34 J. Drzewucki, "Gdzieś obok, poza wszystkim," in: *Smaki słowa. Szkice o poezji*, Wrocław 1999, p. 134.

35 A. Sandauer, "Na przykład Szymborska," in: *Liryka i logika*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 408–409; "Pogodzona z historią," in: *Poeci czterech pokoleń*, Kraków 1977.

36 J. Błoński, "Sól doświadczenia," *Życie Literackie* 42/1962.

37 P. Michałowski, "Wisławy Szymborskiej poetyka zaprzeczeń," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2/1996, p. 129.

38 J. Trzeciak, "Wisława Szymborska: The Enchantment of Everyday Objects," *Publishers Weekly* 7.04.1997, p. 69.

sensitivity to the suffering of an always hurt individual and “sensitivity to social issues.”<sup>39</sup> Here, Stanisław Barańczak’s observation is very important: “The title of the second volume of poems is certainly symbolic for her whole mature work: *Questions You Ask Yourself* have been the essence of Szymborska’s work for forty years.”<sup>40</sup>

The full list of critical statements about Szymborska’s Stalinist-era work would consume a lot of space. Let us satisfy ourselves with the few approximations, projections, and generalizations. The next issue also finds no unequivocal approach among the scholars. Is Szymborska’s poetic work a whole composed from the “evolution” of some elements over the other or did her strict selection reject premature ideological choices and unfortunate artistic ideas forever?<sup>41</sup> Certainly, the glorification of the Communist Party or the praise of socialist construction should be discarded. Nevertheless, we should study the development of the language of Szymborska’s poetry, because the originality of certain solutions exceeds the schematic norms of the Stalinist era. Soon after 1956, her abilities will cease to serve a harmful collective utopia and false illusions.

Some would prefer to link the artistic value of Szymborska’s Stalinist-era literary rehearsals with the knowledge of her later achievements which effected in the awarding of the Nobel Prize. They throw special light on the poems of that time and enter them into an embarrassing social ritual. However, the reviews of Szymborska’s first two volumes show opinions sometimes very similar to those of our contemporaries.<sup>42</sup> Did the critics know the finale of her work almost half a

39 A. Legeżyńska, *Wisława Szymborska*, Poznań 1996, pp. 19–20.

40 S. Barańczak, “Nie ma pytań pilniejszych od pytań naiwnych,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* 12–13.10.1996. Also see A. Węgrzyniakowa, *Nie ma rozpusty większej niż myślenie. O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej*. Katowice 1996, p. 17.

41 J. Rogoziński, “nie starczy ust...,” in: *Preteksty. Szkice o współczesnej poezji polskiej*, Warszawa 1985, p. 150.

42 Also see, among others, L. Flaszyn, “Poezja agitacji osobistej,” *Życie Literackie* 13/1953; Z. Lichniak, “Dlatego czekamy,” *Dziś i Jutro* 12/1953; Z. Jastrzębski, “Poezja dnia dzisiejszego,” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 28/1953; J. Bocheński, “Cenny debiut poetycki,” *Trybuna Wolności* 20/1953; R. Matuszewski, “Liryka podwładna myśli,” *Nowa Kultura* 29/1953; J. Trznadel, [untitled review of W. Szymborska, *Dlatego żyjemy*], *Twórczość* 3/1953, pp. 165–167; [untitled review of W. Szymborska, *Pytania zadawane sobie*], *Twórczość* 12/1954, p. 145; W. Natanson, “Pytania i odpowiedzi,” *Nowa Kultura* 12/1955; Z. Pędziński, “Poezja szukająca współczesności,” *Dziś i Jutro* 20/1955; L. Herdegen, “Myśli i wiersze,” *Życie Literackie* 35/1954; Z. Jastrzębski, “O Szymborskiej i nowej poezycy,” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 36/1955. For a thorough elaboration of criticism, see A. Zarzycka, *Rewolucja Szymborskiej*, pp. 175 ff.

century ago. Did they receive the gift of clairvoyance? It is prudent to think that the germs of Szyborska's poetics – which existed at the beginning and fruited later – tried to break through the aggressive buzz of agitation.

The critics above were not deaf to elements liberating poetry from newspeak. How many times could one read the same thing over and over? Besides propaganda slogans and ideological generalizations, Szyborska's poems from the 1950s did share some warmth with the ordinary people, those were timid signs of kindness, interest, and understanding. The reviewers at the time indirectly hint that even a timidly disclosed subject of individual human dilemmas can be interesting. Of course, this does not mean that they were not conscientious literary officials who would abandon their duties. As we know, the socialist realist criticism was closer to ideology than literature, hence more privileged. Critics spoke on behalf of the authorities as controllers of the implementation of the doctrine, so that their duty was to instruct writers and correct their errors. They often rejected works for further revision and even assumed a prosecutor's toga.<sup>43</sup>

The critic not only addressed the (omnipresent) authorities but partly also to the poets. Such elements of independence were valuable. Besides, the first glory of the Stalinist faith has already passed when *Questions You Ask Yourself* saw daylight. The critical pieces from that time reveal an interesting duality of the official and the private. The dialectical mind was able to remedy this stratification of imagination. Antinomies somehow cancel each other out. After all, "Marxism has eliminated the contradiction between the private and social nature of people."<sup>44</sup> This is how it looks in literary practice. According to Leszek Herdegen, "The socialist realist poet writes a personal poem about Nowa Huta, while a political one – about love."<sup>45</sup> Let us appreciate the perverse charm of this sentence. There are various methods of agitation. Instead of shouting through a giant megaphone, one may whisper, which suits the female voice better.

Assessment squares the circle. Socialist realist critics holds Szyborska's verses in high regard, because they agree with the obligatory worldview and simultaneously show original language. Paraphrasing Gombrowicz, we should say that the critics like when schematism is not to schematic.

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43 J. Smulski, "O polskiej socrealistycznej krytyce (i samokrytyce) literackiej," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2/2000, pp. 31 ff. Among others, Smulski refers to the informative books by D. Mattson Tubielewicz, *Polska socrealistyczna krytyka jako narzędzie władzy*, Uppsala 1997, and M. Zawodniak, *Literatura w stanie oskarżenia. Rola krytyki w życiu literackim socrealizmu*, Warszawa 1998.

44 Flaszen, "Poezja agitacji osobistej."

45 L. Herdegen, "Dwa tomiki poezji," *Świat* 27/1953, p. 14.

## Poetry: A Second Voice

The below poems are again situated “inside the newspaper.” Szymborska made them to order and published in occasional issues of periodicals. Such close dependence happened to her twice. The issue praising the project of the “good but rarely used” Constitution of the 1952 offers Szymborska’s poem “Gdy nad kolebką ludowej konstytucji do wspomnień sięga stara robotnica” (When the Old Worker Reaches for Her Memory Over the Cradle of Folk Constitution); while the same journal published her poem after the death of Stalin, “Ten dzień” (This Day).<sup>46</sup> Her poetic statements correspond with the introductory articles, heavily saturated with propaganda tasks. However, Szymborska more often uses her poems at that time to rework the messages from newspapers. Such a close symbiosis proved possible in the history of Polish literature only once – during the Stalinist era. The newspaper serves the writer as a collection of themes, a handy encyclopedia, partly a guidebook to the world. There, everything is given to believe. According to Ryszard Nycz:

in the socialist realist literature, the newspaper (i.e. proper party newspaper) received the role of undisputed authority, which ends disputes, solves intrigues, explains, and enables the right ideological evaluation of the situation.... Press releases served ... the function of ideological models or revolving ideals. Reality was to adapt to information, while literature – to the newspaper message about this information.<sup>47</sup>

There is no escape from the newspaper in the 1950s. Literature is condemned to speak with a second voice – obligatory and obligated. The poetry of the 1950s only seemingly makes contact with ordinary life, but what actually obscures empiricism are the printed pages of instructional texts. The poet of the time usually does not read the world but is a close reader of the press. This reduces the element of risk as the selection of facts has already happened, and their ideological interpretation has received the official *imprimatur*. The writer first responds to the expectations of the authorities and then directs those ideological directives to the reader. Thus, the reality remains out of the way and only literary schemes can mix with the propaganda schemes.

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46 See A. Bikont, J. Szczęsna, *Wisławy Szymborskiej pamiątkowe rupiecie, przyjaciele i sny*, Warszawa 1997, pp. 101–103.

47 R. Nycz, ““Cytaty z rzeczywistości”. Funkcja wiadomości prasowych w literaturze,” in: *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*, Warszawa 1993, pp. 237–238.

We already know the themes of Szymborska's poems from the Stalinist era. Often, she outright mentions her beginning with news information.<sup>48</sup> For example, the motto is an excerpt from the newspaper: "The aviator Enrique Bernal, who threw the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, resides as a monk in a monastery in Castro Urdiales (from the press)" ("Ucieczka;" Escape; PZS 26). In another gloss to a poem, we read, "Notes from the lecture of historical texts about the defense of Stalingrad" ("Dlatego żyjemy;" Why We Live; DŻ 5). On the other hand, "Malowidło w Pałacu Zimowym" (A Painting in the Winter Palace) has a more generic birth certificate of the news. It is enough that it was based on "the basis of an authentic event" (PZS 9). Newspaper and historical propaganda pamphlet have the same power of decision about what happened and what it means for the reader, because they constitute the guarantees of indisputable truth. The newspaper genealogy of the following poems is obvious "Pieśń o zbrodniarzu wojennym," "Tarcza," "Z Korei" (Song About a War Criminal; Shield; From Korea). Maybe "Amu-Daria" (Amu Darya) is an echo of a reportage, likewise "Rówieśnice" (Peers), while "Młodzieży budującej Nową Hutę" (For the Youth That Builds Nowa Huta) probably echoes an editorial.

In the Stalinist era, poetry should not only imitate newspapers but also do their work. Therefore, one must find free space for literary elaboration. Agitation will lose some of its roughness, it will be refined and elevated to a slightly higher level. A repeated commentary tells the reader the feelings and emotions, because the interpretation is ready. In "Ucieczka," a newspaper note becomes an excuse to arrange a ballad about a penitent, which becomes a zealous praise of the brave new world. Enclosed in the monastery, the enemy cannot participate in the blossoming beauty and broadly spreading excellence:

– everything is beside him – the fertile earth  
and its future fate, the beautiful people,  
who want to save from doom  
themselves and new generations,  
their work, trust, and bravery  
is worthy of life and happiness in life ...  
the truth of lips, the sharpness of eyes  
that divides good from evil (PZS 26).

The poem rejects expiation but also the opportunity to make the perpetrator-penitent into a tragic figure. The prosecutor adopts a black-and-white worldview

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<sup>48</sup> Flaszen, "Poezja agitacji osobistej," comments on this statement by saying that, "Szymborska draws conclusions from newspaper facts."

in which only “our community” can have beauty and good. The poem’s language of noble generalities only describes the utopia of the future.

Szyborska’s and others’ poems of the Stalinist era make a compromise that allows them to oscillate between the newspaper’s cliché and the little inventions of elocution, to circulate between the stereotype and cautious novelty. Of course, the critics quickly and drastically cut off the innovative sprouts of poetic language as only the model of simplified poetry is permissible. You cannot outbid the newspaper, but you may secretly compete with it. Alternative rhetoric can be attractive. Poetry as the “second voice” briefly summarizes the events, because everyone has read the source text anyway. So that the initial action is not as much important as the reaction.

An extract of propaganda slogans will appear in Szyborska only once in the poem “Z elementarza” (From a Primer). She limits her artistic task here only to a skilful composition and rhyming of ready-made phrases:

The highest form of matter  
is a human being, the Earth dweller.  
The highest form of existence –  
its conscious action.  
The highest form of action –  
struggle for peace on earth.  
The highest form of the struggle –  
to fight with common forces.

O yes, brothers, o yes.  
To fight with common forces (DŻ 38).

The design of this message eliminates any surprise, while the point is a repetition. From a magical rite, there emerges the voice of the choir guide only to confirm the validity of inviolable formulas. We sometimes find in Szyborska’s poems from Stalinist era reminders on which ideological world we live, for instance in “Trzeba,” “Amu-Daria,” “Wstępującemu do partii” (We Must; Amu Darya; To the One Who Becomes a Party Member). Such literature approaches mnemotechnics, whose domain is repetition and remembering.

To justify propaganda on the level of primary school, Szyborska introduces monologs of ordinary workers who are the measure and conscience of the new reality. Hence, they have excellent qualifications for mentors. The simple person – an authority for the intellectuals – has no own language in socialist realist incarnation, because an alien language should suffice. Therefore, people repeat propaganda slogans like, “They hate our coal./They hate our bricks and yarn,” in “Robotnik nasz mówi o imperialistach” (Our Worker Speaks About the



Imperialists; DŻ 18). Sentences-remedies are to curb the evil powers unambiguously associated with the capitalist camp.

The situation of reading a primer is somewhat paradigmatic for the type of socialist realist poetry. All are children in the face of ideological faith. This infantilization includes the rhythm of rhetorical questions like “Who built the house in which I live?/Who laid his work as its foundation?” in “Młodzieży budującej Nową Hutę” (DŻ 17). We have the impression that, although there is no mystery here, the ritual demands consistent choral answers.

The socialist realist communication theater assumes that the auditorium is immature. It is better to still go down on the levels of simplification than, by complicating the sense, expose oneself to apostasy. The reader is driven to school. The phenomenon of socialist realist “ferdydurkism” – in reference to Gombrowicz – obviously has a wider range and is only mentioned here.

The character delegated to the task of agitation is a performer of the text, which always lies within the areas of predictability. Here, literature announces its defeat with enthusiasm. It accepts the drastic limitations of artistic language and recognizes the ideological primacy of the newspaper. Instead, literature receives the illusion of massive influence. Still, in Szymborska’s poetry of the time, we may still sometimes sense a spark of irony, even if only in the confirmation of axioms and obligatory exercises.

## Women International

Besides thunderous words that gave the illusion of charismatic leadership – many young poets imitated Majakowski – we notice more modest stylistics of cooperation with official ideology. Szymborska’s usually locates her poems of the time in the latter. Noteworthy, the gigantic scale of social change is diminished in Szymborska’s work. First, Szymborska reveals a private point of view in the discourse powered by newspeak. Second, she exposes the concerns and hopes of ordinary people over whom – according to the propaganda – watch the caregiving authorities.

The speaker of socialist realist poems considers, controls, comments on, and converses with the reactions of interlocutors. If a dispute arises, then the one who speaks the last is the one who transmits the proper ideological evaluation of phenomena, like in “Rozmowa ze sceptykiem” (Conversation with a Skeptic). The critical readings of Szymborska’s poems from the 1950s omitted one important thread that I would call the solidarity of women, or the socialist realist herstory. Ideology still controls the lawfulness of views, but agreement in the female circle has other foundations. Szymborska employs the old topos

of lamenters – mothers mourning the death of their children – and shares the pain of Vietnamese women who are experiencing war in the poem “Jako matka” (As a Mother). In a feigned conversation with an American woman, the speaker explains the military conflict from the perspective of maternal pain in “Do matki amerykańskiej” (To the American Mother). While in “Tarcza” (Shield) the fanatical protest emerges from the image of a delicate female body lying on rail tracks to stop a transport of weapons to Vietnam. In the latter poem, mourning turns into a triumph,<sup>49</sup> while elegy turns into a hymn. However, let us add that this work is not faithfulness to facts because the heroin – a French communist – did not perish under the train as readers may assume from the silences, and the protest organized by the French Communist Party at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps station gathered crowds (February 23, 1950).

In “Tarcza,” we find a statement that Raymonde Dien is a “peer of our young female workers” (DŻ 23). Hence, Szymborska fosters an image of a women international: be it Vietnamese, French, or Polish – which refers to the mass songs and iconography of the time. Simultaneously, the vision of Szymborska approaching old age seems quite peculiar: “When dying, I want to be friends/with a young female medic-communist/as peer with peer” (“Rówieśnice;” Peers; DŻ 15). Perhaps she will not even have to, as communism will overcome illness and old age, because the progress of science is in this political part of the world. The upbringing of girls emphasizes the benefits of the new system, which establishes a world in the image of the Garden of Eden. This social vision assumes that women will finally cease to be victims of discrimination and degradation (“Gdy nad kołyską ludowej konstytucji do wspomnień sięga stara robotnica”).

In Szymborska’s highly persuasive poetry of the Stalinist era, female biology also becomes an irresistible argument. The Communist Garden of Eden must be built and – nota bene – populated again. It is not often that we find in socialist realist poems fragments that praise the “lush earth,” the wait for new generations to come, and the “nudity/in love, grain in the hips of women” (“Ucieczka;” PZS 27). The leap from ideology to love is not at all violent, because the generation of “beautiful people” in new homes and cities – as poets repeat after propagandists – will be able to fully participate in collective happiness.

What’s more, the romanticist model became obsolete, while the scenario of love stories – simplified. Even lovers do not have to be individualized, because a standard model is enough for everyone. In one of Szymborska’s poems, we read: “In each window a Kathy/waits for Johnny/a little ladybug sat on her hand”

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49 Cf. T. Nyczek, *Tyle na raz świata. 27 x Szymborska*, Kraków 2005, pp. 31–32.

("W oknie;" In a Window; DŻ 33). We see another fairy tale here. At the end of the poem, the recipient immediately recognizes folklore stylization. Noteworthy, ideologized folk fit perfectly in the socialist realist poetics. First, it reveals the class character of the statement; second, it democratizes art by approximating anonymous models; third, it easily formed a bond with recipients.<sup>50</sup>

The discussed period offered some a place for personal lyric, although mediocre. In Szyborska's books, love is as a pretext. The role of direct confession of feelings is limited, because someone's story about disappointed expectations is empathetically heard in "Do zakochanej nieszczęśliwie" (To the Girl Unhappy in Love) or a date conversation turns toward "professional" and literary feelings in "Osobiste" (Personal). Only "Rozgniewana muza" (The Angried Muse) breaks away from the duties of agitation. This semi-humorous monolog distances itself from love lyric by saying: the word may last longer than feeling, so let us better not stir anything recklessly. Similarly, "Key" and "Lovers" show no sign of the ideologization of emotion, and we should rather read them along with Szyborska's later reflections on love. Thus, she was able to transgress the prescription of the socialist realism doctrine.

## The Toil of Poets

Let us reflect on Szyborska's understanding of the tasks of poetry in her works from the 1950s. First, let us concentrate on literature about love that shows a changed world of "social happiness." Here, the verbal act is defined like an appeal at the production line: "we need poems about love/so that they keep the lovers safe" ("Trzeba;" We Need To; DŻ 34). In a socialist paradise, poems decorate the "evening hours" (DŻ 34). This view is clearly reductionistic that makes poetry into an inexpensive supplement of life managed by ideology. The adopted rules clearly define order: first come production and construction, then everything else. The simile of the poet to the worker and rhyming, for example, to the work of the bricklayer, intends not to degrade the beautiful art of writing. The young protagonist of the poem "Wzrastanie" (Growing), who under capitalism would be a farmhand, can now choose:

To be a poet or an engineer?  
 To make a poem or a house – what is more beautiful?  
 Sometimes a rhyme is lighter than a brick.  
 Sometimes a wall is smoother than a stanza (DŻ 31).

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50 W. Tomasiak, "Ludowość," in: *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego*, pp. 132–133.

The word and the material world share the activity building. When we compare this approach with the avant-garde and constructivist idea of the poet-builder, it turns out that the issue is simpler: the proletarian of rural origin, who experienced the school of life, can successfully write poetry for the people. Besides, a writer who advanced in the society would over time develop literary awareness.

To emphasize the change in culture, Wiktor Woroszyński used such formulas: “BEWARE, POLITICAL POETS/axemen of imagination, loaders of emotion.”<sup>51</sup> Szyborska was alien to such “labor” appeals. She picks private situations and uses a hushed voice when dreaming about finding mass readership. An ordinary human smile is to win the reader’s favor, unfortunately – and according to the doctrine of that time – perceived en masse: “If only one poem – I want it passionately –/to carry with a smile to villages and factories” (“Osobiste;” The Personal; DŻ 36).

If everyone were convicted that the world begins anew, they also announced a new era in culture. The artist was not ready to accept the duties waiting for him. So one had to go through a series of initiations. It consisted of a remodeling of consciousness and gradual growth to understand the ideals of the new times. Therefore, one had to negate previous ideas, adopt other principles, and learn from the beginning how to “think, act, speak” (“Nie dość;” Not Enough; DŻ 11). Zdzisław Łapiński believes that such conversion that preconditioned participation in literary life meant “an act of self-degradation.”<sup>52</sup> To “live usefully among people” (“Nie dość;” DŻ 11) is the most difficult point of transformation – we read in Szyborska’s poems – which means writing according to the changed conscience. Our anatomy is to suggest the choice of worldview; after all, the heart is on the left. This is said with grace and humor that relieves the poem from heavy agitation.

In the volume *Why We Live*, we will find the outline of a program. Szyborska writes that the poet should not look into the poisoned well or deal with obsolete mysticism (“Do twórcy;” To the Artist). It means that artists should reject individual sensitivity and relinquish metaphysical matters. Second, aestheticism is narcissism. There is nothing good about loneliness. There is no place for a sad face of the artist in a joyous era. This was appropriate for the decadent past.

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51 W. Woroszyński, “Na odwrocie nekrologu Wincentego Pstrawskiego,” in: *Śmierci nie ma*, Warszawa 1949, p. 7. Also see Woroszyński’s “Sprawozdanie lipcowe,” in: *Pierwsza linia pokoju. Poezje 1949–1950*, Warszawa 1951, p. 22.

52 Łapiński, *Jak współżyć z socrealizmem*, p. 95.

Szyborska's program consists in rejecting specific themes and artistic approaches. Although, the advent of "the new" cannot renounce the entire past of culture, if only because the poet must communicate with the recipient, ill adept in reading complicated literary codes. We heard about the paradox of proclaiming revolutionary ideas in the past languages of art. Therefore, many repurposed the easy stylistic and well-assimilated patterns of genres for propaganda. They only received a new ideological sticker. Persuasive efficacy did not exclude side effects like an accurate metaphor, a beautiful sentence, and a developed strophe.

We may criticize how mythical and historical heroes were linked to the gathering of modern fighters and activists. They accuse imperialist crimes or indirectly praise the benefits of the Communist system ("Wyspa siren;" The Island of Sirens; "List Edwarda Dembowskiego do ojca;" Edward Dembowski's Letter to Father). Such reinterpretations of myths are nothing peculiar at the time. Writers boldly use history, completely devoid of historicism. There is no difference between the progressive past and the current victorious time. The jump between yesterday and today requires no additional explanations, because authorities proved that the scenario of history did not deviate from the provided rules. The mechanism of the "self-fulfilling prophecy"<sup>53</sup> worked perfectly.

Artistic doubts seem to be a virtual problem. The subject carries Szyborska, while her hesitations about artistic expression paradoxically reveal certainty. For instance, this is the case in "Tarcza." After rhetorical retardation that seemingly stops the lyrical tale – "With what pen should I describe the moment" (DŻ 22) – the rhythms of sentences progress smoothly and, without much interference in the narrative, there emerges the combined pattern of ballad and elegy.<sup>54</sup> We also witness the selection of species, when reading the following warning: "It is a bad epitaph, oh poets,/if it laments the death of a hero" ("Pocłunek nieznanego żołnierza," DŻ 10). In a joyful time when "death is gone," the memory of mourning along with threnodies, epicedia, and poetry of lamentation is inappropriate.

The magazine of literary forms was well stocked, so authors used it eagerly yet indiscriminately. As I mentioned, ambitious experiments ceased. Thus, the literary twentieth century was rarely visited, and only in secret. The genre patterns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served to praise the political and social change. The noble origin of expression consecrated by tradition mixed

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53 R. Nycz, "Cytaty z rzeczywistości," p. 238.

54 Nyczek, *22 x Szyborska*, Poznań 1997, p. 25, finds in this poem traces of "a classical ancient elegy with its couplet structure."

with quickly promoted genres – the utilitarian, the journalistic – while syncretic combinations abound.<sup>55</sup> The recipient's ear was to hear a familiar voice, a recognizable rhythm. However, no one sought an exact transfer. On the contrary, the distant echo of something known eased the rape of the viewer's imagination. The classicist or romanticist form inspired trust in propaganda-literary messages. Moreover, the socialist realist genology was subordinated to the principle of *decorum*,<sup>56</sup> which meant the appropriateness of style to the subject.

Often, Szymborska overcomes the compromise of verse journalism and artistry in her 1950s poetry. What often succeeds is sheer good literary work. A list of genological references includes a hymn and an ode<sup>57</sup> (“Lenin,” “Na powitanie socjalistycznego miasta;” On the Greeting of a Socialist City), a ballad (“Czterej;” The Four; “Miłość Marii i Piotra Curie;” The Love of Maria and Piotr Curie), a realistic picture (“Gdy nad kołyską...;” “Wzrastanie”), and an outline of an epic poem (“Wyspa siren;” The Island of Sirens). There also appear mixtures and hybrids. For example, the combination of a ballad with a hymn (“Ucieczka;” Escape), in which – between the reprimand and the affirmation – there happens a switch of genre rules; or a mixture of an epitaph with an epigram written with almost rococo lightness (“Pocałunek nieznanego żołnierza”). Another example appears in the poem “Gdy nad kołyską...,” in which Szymborska reaches for the conventions of a reportage, a realist novella, and a hymn. Such adaptations usually change the functions and meanings of genres. The popular ballads of the early 1950s hide the most important romanticist properties: spiritualism, freneticism, mysteriousness. In socialist realist writing, everything must come clear according to the dialectical and materialistic key. Every sketch and picture from reality must speak not for itself, its autonomy is limited by the discursive commentary that covers ideological interpretation, which sometimes exceeds the anecdote itself.

Szymborska's poems of the Stalinist era hold a rich repertoire of utilitarian texts and nonliterary methods of communication, especially related to social didactics. Under Stalinism, great careers happened to speeches, talks, endless appeals, Orwellian Two Minutes Hate, mass songs, propaganda films, and collective parties. Not to mention the area of obtrusive inscriptions: slogans, instructions,

55 For more, see T. Wilkoń, “Konwencje genologiczne poezji socrealistycznej,” in: *Polska poezja socrealistyczna*, pp. 76–88.

56 P. Michałowski, “Wisława Szymborska: dialog i soliloquium,” in: *Głosy, formy, światy. Warianty poezji nowoczesnej*, Kraków 2008, p. 98.

57 On the socialist realist types of odes, see T. Kostkiewiczowa. *Oda w poezji polskiej. Dzieje gatunku*, Wrocław 1996, pp. 342–347.

and reminders constantly attacked people on every corner. The individual should be alone for a moment. Such aura most clearly surfaces in Szymborska's poems "Ten dzień nadejdzie" (This Day Will Come), "Wstępującemu do partii," "Trzeba."

The popular practice of speaking appears – transformed – in several Szymborska's works of the Stalinist era. Baroque titles from the volume *Why We Live* reveal the situation, who speaks to whom and about what in "Żołnierz radziecki w dniach wyzwolenia do polskich dzieci mówił tak" (The Soviet Soldier Spoke This Way to Polish Children on the Day of Liberation), "Robotnik nasz mówi o imperialistach" (Our Worker Speaks of the Imperialists), and "Gdy nad kołyską Ludowej Konstytucji do wspomnień sięga stara robotnica." The verse-conversation "Jako matka" ennobles persuasion. Once the most popular poem by Szymborska printed in school textbooks, "Gawęda o miłości ziemi ojczystej" (Yarn About the Love for Homeland), eludes journalism and propaganda with a lecture on collective values maintained in a seemingly amorphous shape with freely formulated judgments.<sup>58</sup>

What should occupy the prominent position in the people's society is people's poetry. This was the critics thought and what they wrote in critical texts. Thus, folklore stylization became an obsession of socialist realist poets.<sup>59</sup> Its propagandist applications in works about collectivization, tractors, and progress abound with unintended humoristic effects. Except the poetry of Szymborska. She rarely uses folklore heritage and to a limited extent. She does not utilize folk motifs but only versification and syntax or roots statements in eternal collective wisdom: "On the edge of a rock,/their hair did they comb,/and silvery sang on the tiny wave" ("Wyspa syren," PZS 31); "They said, they taught/good people:/never a child, no child/is alien" ("Jako matka," PZS 29). These folklore encrustations strengthen the literary quality of these poems.

Finally, let us point to Szymborska's references to film technique. Besides the speeches by the protagonist of "List Edwarda Dembowskiego do ojca," we find much more interesting places in terms of art: the overlapping of images from different times and places, the movement of the camera from object to object, and transitions from the general plan to close-ups along with quick nervous cut scenes. The literary equivalents of film language are motivated in two ways: long static shots correspond to the order of memories, while the flickering of frames to the monolog of the fugitive. References to the possibilities of film surface

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58 See J. Drzewucki, in: *Zachwył i rozpacz*.

59 T. Kostkiewiczowa, *Oda w poezji polskiej*, pp. 124 ff.

more clearly in the poem “Malowidło w Pałacu Zimowym.”<sup>60</sup> What are the most interesting elements of this piece are the interference of the real and the painted world (in a mirror), optical games of refracting light, dynamics of movement and immobility, the use of camera eye to reveal details. Mirages of reflections in mirrors, the dynamics of quick cuts, and the focus on the movement of anonymous characters evokes the montage of Sergey Eisenstein’s film *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1927).

The voice of poetry participated in collective life that consisted of various campaigns and mass actions. The subject of labor was made to look heroic like military actions; it eliminated unselfish beauty. The remodeling of consciousness served to make the writer a part of the social organism according to the indications of the authorities; the author presented not the existing, but the postulated reality. Just like her colleagues, Szymborska adapted literary formulas from the past to the tasks of agitation; she built from these signs the language of mutual understanding with her readers. Both of her Stalinist-era volumes, *Why We Live* and *Questions You Ask Yourself*, we find allusions to contemporary forms of communication. There is a shift from literaturiness to ideological tasks, but Szymborska simultaneously develops in the opposite direction: toward precisely planned artistic effects.

## The Solemn Weather

Socialist realism knew only holidays. The poor life of ordinary people, unusable in propaganda, unworthy of an ode, was accompanied by triumphant fanfare. The celebration of victory continued endlessly. The authorities paid great attention to anniversaries and jubilees, congresses and conventions. Workers built altars for the Party and the communist saints. This surplus of feasts that transformed everything into a memorable historical moment – described so aptly by Victor Klemperer in his analysis of Nazi rituals *The Language of the Third Reich* – had his negative: the lack of everyday life. Excessively used holiday quickly lost its value.

Socialist realist poetry had to match the “greatness of the era” by creating a special ceremonial language, partly of ready-made elements, in which the secular became the sacred, and partly of new emblems and symbols. The old principle of decorum was in force. The subjects of the highest importance that neared the sacred circle – the mystery of October Revolution, the Communist Party, and the lives of leaders – appeared in the elevated style, while descriptions of joyous

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60 It was mentioned by Herdegen, *Mysli i wiersze*, p. 129.



moments of the everyday were served by the middle style, halfway hieratic and ornate; even the low style was acceptable, because of its natural proximity to colloquial speech – modest and ordinary – that suited the unsophisticated festivals of the working people.

The most popular among genres were the ode and panegyric,<sup>61</sup> while hyperbole and periphrasis among the figures of style. The return of genres in which sophisticated praise played an important role became a literary epidemic. Authors competed with each other, who will exhibit a better wit, but this was also their source of major discomfort – that original ideas were quickly depleted. Here returns the unsolvable dilemma: how to flatter and remain safe?

Most often, Stalinist-era writers used pathos and delight. However, we easily notice that emotionality of high rhetorical tones remains under the strict control of the socialist realist doctrine: it is included into the ritual. As she cannot go there, Szymborska only twice glances at the “Olympus of Stalinism” by combining the mythologies of the highest gods – Stalin and Lenin – with the image of the Party as the allegorical deity.<sup>62</sup> The threnody on the death of the “engine driver of history” turns into a panegyric in honor of the leading force of humanity in the poem “Ten dzień.” Whereas the adoration of the grave of the leader – the most important sanctuary of communism and the place of pilgrimage – simultaneously becomes praise of the future victory in “Lenin:” “he will be crowned with flowers/from planets yet unknown today” (DŻ 44). We may be terrified by this hyperbole, but progress was literally without limits at that moment of history.

Let us consider a few comparisons. Władysław Broniewski expresses the matter concisely: “Lenin’s grave – simple as thought .../Lenin’s act – simple and grand/as the Revolution.”<sup>63</sup> Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński confesses: “a sinful man, after years of mistakes,/I finally arrived here.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, at that time, the holy grave on Moscow’s Red Square radiates the ideas of a great change; here lead all the paths of the followers of communism. Noteworthy, the panegyrics for Lenin repeat the images and promises from the holy scriptures. Here are the greatest and the chosen, like the prophets of the Old Testament, who will be the first to pass the threshold of the new kingdom of happy humanity. As

61 Wilkoń, *Polska poezja socrealistyczna*, Gliwice 1992, pp. 78–79.

62 J. Łukasiewicz: *Mitologie socrealizmu*, pp. 37 ff, writes more specifically about the hierarchical structure of the sacralisation of the Stalinist world.

63 W. Broniewski, “Pokłon Rewolucji Październikowej,” in: *Młodym do lotu. Wybór wierszy*, Warszawa 1952, p. 113.

64 K. I. Gałczyński, “Przed mauzoleum Lenina,” in: *Ślubne obrączki*, Warszawa 1949, p. 19.

Mieczysław Jastrun writes: “Our age will pass, but you first,/Oh statesmen of the proletariat,/Will enter the future.”<sup>65</sup> This elevated style is supported by the Christian sacrum. Another variation of Lenin’s worship tends toward a “parasitism” on the Polish language of romanticist mythology. In such manner Wiktor Woroszyński defines the sacrifice of a hero communist: “he could love for the millions,/he suffered and burned like for the millions.”<sup>66</sup> The two verses mix the Bible and Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefather’s Eve*.

“Describe a thing instead of naming it” says Aristotle in the part of *Rhetoric* on impressiveness.<sup>67</sup> At the heart of periphrastic speech lies ornamentation combined with a riddle, whose solution not difficult. Rather, the described object becomes even more majestic and inaccessible. Periphrasis prevents trivial terms from polluting the deity. In place of the most important name of Stalin, which should not be pronounced, there may appear a syntactically elaborated periphrasis: “the fourth profile on the banner of the Revolution” (*Ten dzień*, PZS 11). On the mass produced emblem, Stalin’s profile was placed closest to the viewer, but this is not the only reason why the number four was de facto number one. In the socialist realist literature, this is clearly demonstrated by the number of panegyrics for Stalin during his rule – and laments when he died.

The deeds of lesser heroes also deserve decorative splendor. Below see Szyborska’s war reportage that has lost its report features. Eye-witness testimony is filtered through the mind of an author of “historical materials,” and only then transferred into poetry. What does this next elaboration add? Style and rhetoric. Let us consider this fragment:

It burst too early – over the head –  
the bottle that carries fire.  
The soldier that wielded it  
burned with red glow.  
But fire erases no will.  
With his last bottle on the enemy,  
onto the tank’s green shell  
did the red fire plummet (“Dlatego żyjemy,” DŻ 5).

The speaker does not relate here but extol. The bush of periphrases denotes the hero’s death, as do circumstances and objects. The presented struggle loses the violence of an accident in favor of hieratic sublimity. Suffice to consider

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65 M. Jastrun, “Żyjący w dziejach,” in: *Barwy ziemi*, Warszawa 1951, p. 22.

66 W. Woroszyński, “Nowotko,” in: *Ojczyzna*, Warszawa 1953, p. 8.

67 Arystoteles, *Retoryka*, in: *Trzy stylistyki greckie*, transl. W. Madyda, Wrocław 1953, p. 21.

the rhythm of verbs raised by one degree to the enhanced and simultaneously solemn expression. The soldier did not “hold” the bottle but “wielded” it, he did not “catch fire” but “burned,” not “fell” but “plummeted.” As if Szymborska planned the creation of a sculptural monument at once in words. Similarly, the high style in the cycle *Dłatego żyjemy* includes the speeches of warriors at the time of death. They leave memorable thoughts and weighty messages. They speak in the face of history. According to the epic tradition, they declare faithfulness beyond the grave, although not to their senior but the Party. Their death gesture is the chanting of “The Internationale;” in this case a purifying and saving song.

Socialist realist iconography corresponds to the promotion of workers in the social hierarchy. The monumental figures of laborers frequently appeared as the subject of painting and sculpture. Poetry had its own ways to translate them into sculptures or at least create equivalents of posters. In poetry, workers overwhelm their surroundings, or a ritual elevates them above others. In “Wzrastanie,” a young bricklayer “From the height of the scaffolding/today takes ownership of this world” (DŻ 31). Hence, there appeared new rulers at construction heights with scaffolding as their proletarian throne. Szymborska mixes “plebeian eulogy”<sup>68</sup> with praise of Nowa Huta; a city constructed from scratch, for new people, and according to new rules, both urban and ideological. In “Na powitanie budowy socjalistycznego miasta” (On the Construction of a Socialist City), the mythical tale of establishing a city emphasizes the completion of the new site with the nearby historic city of Cracow.<sup>69</sup> One may improve the spatial layout so that there is center everywhere (“a socialist city ... with no alleyways and suburbs,” DŻ 16), but one must especially base the durability of this experiment on two foundations: class consciousness and its materials. Szymborska’s conceptual poetics connects the concrete with the abstract that we know from her later works appears very functional here:

From bricks and proud courage  
will grow the height of buildings.  
From iron and consciousness  
will emerge the spans of bridges (DŻ 16).

However, Szymborska lowers style in the story about the growth and education of the communist. In the poem “Wstępującemu do partii,” the lyrical situation is: one must write a biography. The mentor’s voice suggests the most important facts, names the required virtues, but mostly delights in the beautiful epoch in

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68 “Panegiryk plebejski,” a term introduced by E. Balcerzan in “Strategia agitatora,” p. 153.

69 See W. Tomasik, “Anty-Kraków. Drugi esej o Nowej Hucie,” *Teksty Drugie* 1–2/2000.

which the student lives. There appear significant words: “The solemn weather/of your adolescence” (DŻ 14). Works and days inscribe themselves in an unceasing carnival. According to socialist realist standards, people live in the world-feast.

The more modest celebration of free time has an appropriate rhetorical design, one devoid of decorated figures. Girls who dream about love, spend their time looking for a prince from behind windows; in this fairy tale he is a shock worker. For the first time in history, the windows are opened wide. Socialist construction favors young committed people by creating “eager homes” (DŻ 33) – according to a propaganda scheme – homes for the happy. Szyborska uses here a funny periphrasis (definition) in the scientific spirit, as if taken from a science course: “Windows – good conductors of love” (“W oknie;” In a Window; DŻ 33). Moreover, she describes the naive innocent heroines with an updated style of sentimental idyll. This poem is a great example of candy socialist realism and Ludwik Starski’s 1954 film *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* (Adventure in Mariensztat).

## Retouches, Departures

Szyborska seems bored with the recitation of slogans, so she sometimes throws a stylistic pearl to wake the reader out of numbness. A graceful ornament here, a tasteful interpolation there. In other words, the style betrays the poet. Even her praise of the great dam – the triumph of Soviet engineers who change the irrational nature – becomes the starting point of a language game. Attention moves toward metaphors and delexicalized idioms. In “Amu-Daria,” we read about a wandering desert: “The gale overgrew abandoned cities/flailing with a whip made from sand” (DŻ 42). During a tedious lesson about the imperialists, there suddenly appears a marvelous sentence: “They ripped the atom like a strongbox” (“Robotnik nasz mówi o imperialistach;” DŻ 18). It is difficult to present a more shocking presentation of the movements of a blinded boy who “left/looking with his hands around” (“Z Korei;” DŻ 24).<sup>70</sup> Szyborska’s microstylistics repeatedly, tentatively, and indirectly suggests that there is a more complex world of phenomena beyond what is known.

The eloquent Red Army soldier explains to children the theory of two enemies – the Nazi occupier and the capitalist oppressor – because they should learn it in kindergarten; he does it with the following words about the Soviet offensive: “Be not afraid of this offensive/as the front will pass lika spring shower”

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70 Cf. J. Trznadel, [review of *Dłatego żyjemy*], p. 164.

(“Żołnierz radziecki...;” DŻ 9). The linguistic polysemy of this passage – with all its difference – contains the germs of a more perfectly developed concept: “and the blooming orchards near Verdun/cannot escape/the approaching atmospheric front” (“Reality Demands;” EB 290). Szymborska’s consolation of a soldier-aphorist – taken at face value – brings to mind the ironic remark that Sławomir Mrożek made about Jerzy Andrzejewski’s novel *Popiół i diament* (Ashes and Diamonds), devoted to the early post-war situation in Poland and the establishment of the new authority: “In this book, the Red army moves through the Polish lands like the elves, that is, like ghosts of the woods.”<sup>71</sup> In fact, there few scholarly texts about how the socialist realist literature tamed the dubious charm of change and disarmed the real fears connected with the entry of the Russian army. The belittling of the offensive is probably connected with such fear. The official belief that everything is good is, just in case, completed by the diagnosis that it will not be so bad.

Szymborska’s controversial – even today – epicedium for Stalin, “Ten dzień,” departs from conventional lamentations after his death.<sup>72</sup> The poem does not use the name of the leader, as if it was the name of a deity. Szymborska introduces the motif of writing, which objectifies emotions: “the unshakable printed sign/will not pass the tremors of my hand” (PZS 11). The speaker mediates regret by a psychological analysis of the moment of receiving the message of Stalin’s death. We may even call it a theatricalization of the event. The addressee of the information prolongs the moment of uncertainty, while the choir of messengers keeps silent, because no word would be solemn enough. We must admit that the idea is original, but the ending of the poem turns out to be much worse. The epicedium turns into a hymn of praise for the deified omnipotent Party.

Of course, both Szymborska’s Stalinist-era volumes visibly mark the roles of the poetic “I” that fulfills the rules of socialist realist rituals. Similarly, social situations that created the ominous aura of Stalinism model the ways of literary expression; suffice to mention public processes, hate rallies, self-criticism, and the constant search for enemies. However, this does not preclude Szymborska’s more general reflection, for example, about the nature of compassion, which has nothing to do with socialist realism. Let us notice the distance between the prosecutor’s speech (“you will tremble, aviator, for you knew what you carried,/ you will grow pale, doctor, for you bred death;” “Ten dzień nadzieje;” DŻ 25),

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71 S. Mrożek, “Popiół? Diament?,” in: *Małe prozy*, Kraków 1990, p. 15.

72 See T. Wilkoń, *Polska poezja socrealistyczna*, pp. 65–68.

the dangerous frown (“who allies with a murderer –/is the traitor and enemy of humankind;” “Pieśń o zbrodniarzu wojennym;” DŻ 21), and the lyrical monolog:

Do you open each human destiny  
like a book,  
searching for emotion  
not in font  
or shape (“Pytania zadawane sobie,” PZS 16)?

In the case of the prosecutor and the frown, the language is armed with crushing rhetoric, while anger finds properly selected words. However, hesitation is the domain of private confessions, hence the last fragment ends with a question mark. The metaphors of writing and printing, which will appear in other contexts in Szyborska’s poems, belong here to defenseless empathy. After all, the agitator care not for the book of individual destiny.

Other poets create better copies of articles from party newspapers than Szyborska. It is true that a lot of the above examples fits like a glove, but a number of fragments from her writing practice of that time breaks out of the rigor of the obligatory doctrine. These fragments reject the limits of the socialist realist literary language that is now dead. In this lyric of compassionate conversation, we see the usual sadness in the midst of a joyous era, the nonpolitical suffering of disappointed love, the need to discreetly express feelings (“Do zakochanej nieszczęśliwie;” “Rozgniewana Muza”).

The above works offer a richer area of poetic expression than other socialist realist poems of even outstanding poets. Piotr Michałowski rightly observes that Szyborska opposes the schematic “mostly artistically rather than politically.” Michałowski interprets the role of hesitations and negations as an escape into “virtual ambiguity.”<sup>73</sup> Szyborska’s attempts to speak outside of the standard rigor correct little in the arrangement of ideological certainties but signal the very need for a multi-dimensional truth.

Szyborska’s poetic books *Why We Live* and *Questions You Ask Yourself* do not entirely belong to socialist realist poetry, but the above calculation of proportions revealed little. Is there one and a half socialist realist book? Can we return more of those poems to readership? Let us say the following: in contrast to the poets of the “pimple” generation (*pryszczaci*; the socialist realists)<sup>74</sup> who

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73 P. Michałowski, *Wisławy Szyborskiej poetyka zaprzeczeń*, p. 130.

74 This formation was not a cohesive group that operated in 1949–1956. Its most important representatives are Wiktor Woroszyński, Andrzej Mandalian, and Andrzej Braun. See Z. Jaroński, “Literatura jako władza,” pp. 111 ff.

persuade, criticize, and praise in almost every single poem, Szymborska's way of building the architecture of her poetic book is different; a matter particularly evident in *Questions You Ask Yourself*. She shapes the composition of her volumes from common political recognitions of the world, while inside she puts variable themes in which privacy is permissible. We may see here some similarities with the optimistic episode in Różewicz's poetry, less of a tribune, and more of an ordinary man who pacts with the "time that goes."<sup>75</sup>

Why deal with antiquarian socialist realism, when we may immediately reflect on Szymborska's later poems of the highest quality? The answer will consist of several parts. Her socialist realist mistake sheds light on Szymborska's later artistic biography. According to Anna Legeżyńska, the socialist realist experience taught Szymborska "the art of distance and distrust toward simplistic ethics and simplified aesthetics."<sup>76</sup> The dispute with the patterns of thought and overly obvious truths marks the later works of Szymborska. Therefore, we should not omit the intermediate link between her unfulfilled post-war debut fully matured work. Such neglect would make us lose an important aspect of Szymborska's writing experience. Moreover, proper literary study that observes and describing may partly replace the mythology and revise the repeated rumors about Szymborska. We should not falter in the face of falsely concerned and genuinely hateful inquisitors who only wish to exclusively link Szymborska's name with communist propaganda.<sup>77</sup>

What requires attention and reflection in Szymborska's above works exceeds the ossified socialist realist poetics. We should remember about the breaches and exceptions, retouchings and departures, about the later continuation of experiences that Szymborska gained in unfavorable times for poetry. Some of the poems of that period like "Circus Animals," "Key," and "Lovers" could successfully find their way into her 1957 collection *Calling Out to Yeti*. We sometimes see in them a rare wit, a linking of meanings, and versification proficiency. Even though the whole seems to "spoiled" by declarations, accusations, angry tones,

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75 Cf. T. Drewnowski, *Walka o oddech. O pisarstwie Tadeusza Różewicza*, Wrocław 1990, pp. 103–105.

76 A. Legeżyńska, *Wisława Szymborska*, p. 20.

77 The best example is the book by E. Krajski and S. Krajski, *Dwie twarze Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Warszawa 1996. See M. Kisiel, "Akwinata przewrócił się w niebie," in: *Od Różewicza. Małe szkice o poezji*, Katowice 1999, pp. 62–69. About the "opponents, enemies, and authors of lampoons" writes M. Głowiński in "Szymborska i krytycy," *Teksty Drugie* 4/1998, pp. 194–198.

or naïve optimism, we should mindfully pay attention to the poems “Z Korei,” “W oknie,” “Do zakochanej nieszczęśliwie,” “Malowidło w Pałacu Zimowym.”

Situations from socialist realist poems will cross over to the other side, while once seriously used newspeak will return as an object of parody. Probably “Writing a Résumé” (from *The People on the Bridge*) can be read as an ironic reverse of the adventures of a young activist with a blank page who identifies herself exactly with “what” and “how” should be written (“Wstępującemu do partii”). The apology of communist saints in “Lenin” or “Ten dzień” changes into far-reaching skepticism in “Smiles.” The belief in the beautiful and benevolent power of great scientific achievements in “Miłość Marii i Piotra Curie” will become doubt, counterpointed in the sorrowful reflections in “Discovery.” In “Snapshot of a Crowd,” Szyborska mocks strange newspaper idiolect, while parodic speeches in her mature poetry may only consider nonpolitical everyday matters, as in “A Speech at the Lost-and-Found” or “Dinosaur Skeleton.”

Szyborska may only apply a variation of agitational poetry *à rebours*. However, she keeps all the styles and messages of lyrics belonging to the private trend. It is hard to believe in love on a mass scale – unambiguously happy. It resembles a poster too much. When love does happen, for Szyborska it is a miracle of miracles. Therefore, she will transform the joy of a railway escapade ended with a meeting of lovers in “In Trite Rhymes” into a precisely described “nonarrival” in “The Railroad Station,” in which she negates the details of a positive scenario. We see a different situation with unrequited love. The Stalinist-era “Do zakochanej nieszczęśliwie” appears as if a draft of “Ballad” and “The Tower of Babel.”

Like the poems from before the book debut, we may treat Szyborska’s Stalinist-era poetry as a laboratory useful for her mature creativity. Not only as a chronicle of mistakes and mishaps. According to Szyborska:

chciałoby się wykręcić w [rzeczywistości – W.L.] jakiś trwalszy porządek, dokonać w niej podziału na to co ważne i nieważne, przestarzałe i nowe, przeszkadzające i pomocne. Jest to pokusa groźna, co często wówczas między świat i postęp wciska się jakaś teoria, jakaś ideologia obiecująca wszystko posegregować i objaśnić. [...] Ja tej pokusie niestety uległam, o czym świadczą dwa pierwsze zbiorki wierszy. Sporo już lat minęło od tego czasu, ale pamiętam dobrze wszystkie fazy tego doświadczenia: od radosnej wiary, że z pomocą doktryny widzę świat dużo wyraźniej i szerzej – aż do odkrycia, że to co widzę tak szeroko i wyraźnie, to wcale nie jest już świat prawdziwy, ale zasłaniająca go sztuczna konstrukcja<sup>78</sup>.

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78 W. Szyborska, “Cenię wątpliwości. Przemówienie poetki wygłoszone podczas wręczenia jej Nagrody im. Goethego,” *Dekada Literacka* 30/1991.



In this sense, in the first two of Szymborska's volumes, the world remained without revision of the ideological faith that could not be both ardently accepted and doubted. The "**groźna pokusa**" of segregating and ordering phenomena according to an externally provided key in Szymborska's mature poetry creates a photographic negative to view the world simultaneously from many sides. Certainty is the starting point for doubt, language clichés become material for virtuoso destruction. Wisława Szymborska – the poet of the drama of existence on the metaphysical stage, alternative worlds, great diversity of all things, cognitive inquisitiveness, dialog, irony, exquisite mocking subversiveness – a socialist realist? It seems a premature joke. However, her talent of wise doubt and critical distance would not have developed so well, had it not been for the intellectual-moral adventure of believing an externally instituted truth and adopting someone else's language.



# **The Revision of Language**



### III Szymborska's Rhetorics

#### Types of Dialog

We should not describe the change of Szymborska's thought in poetry as a sudden turn or a quick adjustment to the new orientation of Polish poetry after the historic turn of October 1956; when the Stalinist-era ended with a political and social change that liberalized Polish life and culture. Censorship weakened, it was even abolished at first, so the writers could speak with their own voice. As we have already considered, Szymborska's poems did not fit completely into the narrow frames of the socialist realist doctrine. On the other hand, her reorientation of the style of expression and revaluation of messages occurred gradually. Between the significant episode from the 1950s and the later mature poems, we should insert two connected intermediate thematic spheres. I mean the rejection of religious belief and the problem of great disappointment after the Polish October 1956, when a reckoning with Stalinism was necessary.

The style of the grotesque in the poems "Night" and "Encounter" (from *Calling Out to Yeti*, 1957) is a possibility of artistic diction that is immediately exhausted. Szymborska did not place these texts in later selections. The confession of unbelief, in which the balance of the spirit is to be saved by poetic humor, includes not only the truths of religion but also all dogmas (ideological, social) and sets of principles that use collective instinct. What refers to her childhood autobiography and Catholic upbringing is the cycle of poems previously published under the joint title "Ze wspomnień" (From Memories; in journal *Życie Literackie* 1/1956). The cycle consists of "Night," "Spotkanie," "Hania," "Srebrna kula" (Encounter; Silver Ball). The conversation with the catechist in "Night" shows a difficult problem of the intentional suspension of ethics – once so thoroughly analyzed by Søren Kierkegaard – in a somewhat simplified perspective of school discussion. However, the confession "I won't believe in goodness/or love" (COY 20) has a serious dimension. If ideological or other faith requires sacrifices, it is a false and wrong.

The annulment of illusions also applies to the Szymborska's earlier declarations tuned with the collective vote.<sup>79</sup> In her groundbreaking volume *Calling Out to*

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79 Cf. J. Poradecki, "Spójrzcie na siebie. Humanistyczny relatywizm Wisławy Szymborskiej," in: *Prorocy i sztukmistrze. Eseje o polskiej poezji XX wieku*, Warszawa-Łódź 1999, pp. 242–243.

*Yeti*, the reckoning with recent past has nothing to do with the spectacular performance. It plays out in a small space that foregrounds ethical reflection. The lie collapsed like the walls of Jericho while – after this painful disclosure – there only remains defenseless nakedness in the face of truth in “Historia nierychliwa” (Slow-Moving History).<sup>80</sup> There only remains the acceptance of responsibility and the experience of this “moment zero” in creative biography, from which one should start anew. After the revealing of the Stalinist crimes, when the poets hurriedly renounced their trusting attachment to the struggling ideology of communism, Alexander Wat formulated fundamental doubts: “So your world is clean again as the breast of a young mother?/signs of betrayal, blood, and fear have been removed?”<sup>81</sup> Szyborska’s answer is definitely negative. Her merciless reflection on own blindness uses Hamlet’s monolog with Yorick’s skull (“Rehabilitacja;” Rehabilitation) to say that compassion for the murdered is futile now, helpless words will change nothing, and solemn funerals of the rehabilitated victims of Stalinism indeed are ceremonies of clowns. Szyborska’s accurate grotesque does not spare anyone even the speaker herself. Let us pay close attention to the reversal of roles. The dead act as the whistle-blowers: “They come to us. Sharp as diamonds, .../along rose-colored glasses, along the glass/of hearts and brains – quietly cutting” (“Rehabilitacja,” COY 36). Tadeusz Różewicz used at that time a similar formula: “The dead count the living/the dead will not rehabilitate us” (“Pośmiertna rehabilitacja;” Afterlife Rehabilitation).<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, modern martyrdom gains for Szyborska the semantic background of Christ’s process as a universal model for unjust judgment. After all, the speaker of the poem talks about “false witnesses” and “judgment at night,” which has the characteristics of collusion. The return of the dead resembles here the summonings for the Last Judgment – with the exit from the earth’s element, the domain of death. However, this “last revision” again turns out to be a mockery, as it is overwhelmed by the media clamor, turns into a rite, and has little to do with moral redress. The poetic word will not resurrect the dead, it can undo or erase nothing. The record itself will be dead. The poet as “Sisyphus ascribed to the hell of poetry” (“Rehabilitacja,” WdY 30) will carry only her weakness.

Szyborska courageously writes that the repeated funerals of Stalinist victims were celebrated by the same authorities that had earlier issued sentences. In “Funeral (I)” devoted to László Raj – the leader of the Communist Party of

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80 Cf. T. Nyczek, *22 x Szyborska*, Poznań 1997, pp. 32–33.

81 A. Wat, “\*\*\* Więc świat wasz znów jest czysty,” in: *Poezje zebrane*, Kraków 1992, p. 224.

82 T. Różewicz, *Poezje zebrane*, Wrocław 1976.

Hungary and victim of Stalinism – we recognize the aura of Shakespeare’s jeer. Here, the murderers become mourners. Their expression of appropriate clichés does not restore moral order to the world, neither does it erase the horror. The authority alien to the people simultaneously shows remorse and arrogance. There will be no lack of “police for crowd control” (COY 39) in any such celebration. The still menacing authorities perform clown-like gestures and performs murderous acting, while buffoonery – as Jan Kott argues when discussing Shakespeare’s play *Richard III* – “is a philosophy, and the highest form of contempt: absolute contempt.”<sup>83</sup> Perfectly accurate images and concepts in Szymborska’s poem create a transparent parabola. Let us take as an example the macabre infantile nature of the rite:

His skull, dug up from clay,  
rests in a marble tomb,  
sleep tight, medals, on pillows,  
now it’s got lots of room  
that skull dug up from clay (“Funeral (I),” COY 39).

As if ethical sensitivity fell asleep along with the medals. The bridging of meaning between the invention of the supersonic plane and collective memory appears similarly suggestive. Sorrow and experience are late, mature after years, as if expecting a breakthrough in history. The transparency of memory rekindles discreetly but in a very captivating way in “To My Friends:” “We watch the falling stars/just as after a salvo/plaster drops from the wall” (COY 38).

In the volume *Calling Out to Yeti* (1957), Szymborska responds to recent infatuations with poetic anti-utopia. By narrowing and sharpening the sense of the eponymous metaphor, we may say that faith in the perfect order of communism seems like faith in the existence of Yeti, a snow manlike creature.<sup>84</sup> Allusions to Szymborska’s reckoning with her past surface in her poem about an exam in the history of people as capable only of enslaving others (“Bruegel’s Two Monkeys”).<sup>85</sup> We should position in the same context the gestures of starting anew, confessing for collective faults, and establishing a better world with words, though with noticeable irony (“Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition,” “I’m Working on the World”).

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83 J. Kott, *Szekspir współczesny*, Warszawa 1965, p. 73.

84 E. Hirsch, “A Poetry That Matters,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 1, 1996, p. 50.

85 J. Brzozowski, “Poetycki sen o dojrzałości. O “Dwóch małpach Bruegla,”” in: *O wierszach Wisławy Szymborskiej. Szkice i interpretacje*, ed. J. Brzozowski, Łódź 1996, pp. 9–11.

Beginning with *Calling Out to Yeti*, Szyborska's independent poetic worlds will remain impervious to any doctrinal interference. "I'm Working on the World" importantly recounts the possibilities of escaping oppression. We should read this poetic game in the context of the more general situation of Polish culture after the Polish October 1956. This is when there occurred a loss of trust in the rules of existence imposed by someone else. More specifically, this poem voices a refusal to participate in social and political rituals, although indirectly. What this text rejects above all is the standardization.

"I'm Working on the World" and other poems from *Calling Out to Yeti* like "Funeral (I)," "To My Friends," and "Rehabilitation" – in which the reckoning comes to the fore – belong to the "vein of anti-Stalinist moral revolution in poetry, a vein of citizen reflection and social critique."<sup>86</sup>

As I have mentioned above, the rejection of Marxist omniscience leads to "critical and self-critical"<sup>87</sup> poetry. Artur Sandauer argues that "the moral shock caused a fundamental change in Szyborska's views. They evolve towards something that we may describe after Descartes as "methodic doubt."<sup>88</sup>

What becomes the significant element of Szyborska's poems in the new period are confrontations of many viewpoints, irony, brilliant humor, rhetorical questions, and the need for doubt. From now on, she will only speak on her own behalf. Moreover, if we consider Szyborska's complete oeuvre, autobiographical references are the most numerous and significant in *Calling Out to Yeti*. Szyborska now seeks harmony with the reality through private experiences of intimate events. Along with the redesign of her writing workshop, Szyborska combines the search for other reasons for cultivating the poetic art. Only the individual "I" is responsible for the construction of the world, poetics, ethical choices, and axiological measures. From now on, the essential properties of Szyborska's poetry will include poetic reservations, corrections, revisions of the great text of the world.

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86 T. Burek, "Zapomniana literatura polskiego Października," in: *Żadnych marzeń*, Londyn 1987, p. 60.

87 G. Bauer, *Radość pytania. Wiersze Wisławy Szyborskiej*, transl. Ł. Musiał, Kraków 2004, p. 59.

88 A. Sandauer, "Na przykład Szyborska," in: *Liryka i logika. Wybór pism krytycznych*, Warszawa 1971, p. 410.



## World Under Revision

We approach the key category of this book. World under revision is a metaphor that names the principles of poetic ontology, seeks Szymborska's literary worldview, approximates her lyrical forms, and brings to mind the matters of stylistics and rhetoric. Such defined *unctim* gathers many dimensions of artistic expression and embraces a wealth of solutions. Suffice to indicate Szymborska's diction, syntax, lyrical situations, her dispute with the existing uses of language, and judgments about reality. By creating her separate literary cosmos, Szymborska always keeps "in mind even the possibility/that existence has its own reason for being" ("Possibilities," PB 272). Therefore, she controls the creational flourish with her experience of reality. The poetic renditions of details almost resemble realist technique. Moreover, the experienced world is primitive and ready-made while the creation of poetic fiction is secondary. That is why Szymborska eagerly glosses on the margins of the existing versions of reality.

We should not disregard direct experience filtered through social assumptions or exclude it as pure imagination. Wisława Szymborska chooses intermediate solutions. The visible world is on a par with the lyrical "I," imposes its own rules, dictates limitations, and finally surprises with uncountable individual beings only to transform in the poetic word. The problem of Szymborska's duels with existence comes to the fore in her poems about writing, painting, and composing. Her attitude of humble consent results in rebellion, because the games of artists who abandon their work to negotiate with immortality cannot be innocent (*The People on the Bridge*). On the other hand, the wonderful freedom of the imagination and the unrestrained inventiveness of the mind seek verification in the sphere of everyday empiricism. According to Szymborska, the invented miracle has inferior quality than the miracle of multiplicitous reality.

Szymborska's poetic world remains in motion. It rejects any final shape. It reveals empty or overpopulated places. The accumulation of different things constantly requires ordering. This process never ceases, as there always remains an untapped viewpoint, some suspended possibility. Thus, poetry should confront various perspectives and distrust commonplace opinions. In one of the commentaries to her work, Szymborska refers to the Cyprian Kamil Norwid's poem "Ogólniki" (Clichés) from his volume *Vade-mecum*, which offers a whole accurately expressed program: "Earth – is round – is spherical," but "At the poles – a little flattened."<sup>89</sup> Every outstanding poetry strives for accuracy but this reference

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89 W. Szymborska, "Jak to pisał Norwid?," in: *Debiuty poetyckie 1944–1960. Wiersze autointerpretacje opinie krytyczne*, ed. J. Kajtoch, J. Skórnicki, Warszawa 1972, p. 237.

to Norwid characterizes Szyborska's style of thinking. She adds detailed claims that undermine the acquired certainty of generalizations and seeks exceptions from the binding rules. We may call such Norwid-like difficult treatment of truths as dialogical attitude, convertive vision, or "ex-centric" perception.<sup>90</sup>

Szyborska's poetic language opens to a surprise, a change that we cannot foresee. Each new verbal invention gives a different shade of meaning to the signified and questions the knowledge about a given subject. I do not mean that Szyborska uses makeshift words or programmatic distrust of language as a communication tool. Her descriptions of strange cases of life appear with unusual precision. I would also like to indicate the space between thinking and speech – along with their inconsistencies, distortions, and mutual incoherence, not to mention the different kinds of distance to the language of permanent axiology: the official slogans, colloquial wisdoms, and philosophical axioms.

Szyborska's correction of language does not consist in such radical moves, but in adding new verbal combinations by, say, idiom transformations or exclusions of worn juxtapositions. The distribution of patterns is noticeable: from scientific imaginations through artistic messages to stereotypes, or the images we silently accept in our minds. Own judgments do not have to be direct. What reflects them is the mirror of irony. They surface from collided voices. The accusation of evil, the unmasking of lies, the mockery of manipulation sometimes await their turn to come to light. Szyborska's now more often writes lyrical monologues, stories, and treatises, but their monophony is usually only virtual, as the main element of her poetry is now dialog. For instance, she may begin by challenging the recipient's expectations:

I'll bet you think the room was empty.  
 Wrong. There were three chairs with sturdy backs....  
 No books, no pictures, no records, you guess?  
 Wrong. A comforting trumpet poised in black hands.  
 Saskia and her cordial little flower.  
 Joy in the spark of gods.  
 Odysseus stretched on the shelf in life-giving sleep („The Suicide's Room," LN 225).

It can't even get the things done  
 that are part of its trade:  
 dig a grave,  
 make a coffin,  
 clean up after itself....

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90 See G. Borkowska, "Szyborska eks-centriczna," *Teksty Drugie* 4/1991, pp. 53–54.

Whoever claims that it's omnipotent  
 is himself living proof  
 that it's not. ("On Death, Without Exaggeration," PB 246–247)

To explain suicide is a clinical example of impossibility yet – to overcome anxiety, suppress fear – we still try to match causes with this desperate act. It would be easier to live in the belief that the suicide's room was filled with a sombre emptiness. In turn, complaint about one's own condition is disarmed with evidence that limits the triumphs of death. There is even talk of a thanatological mess-up. Death is clumsy because it offers only decay and knows nothing of the ordering qualities of culture. In a word, Szymborska's poem presents death that "can do nothing that requires one to give shape."<sup>91</sup>

Another kind of game with recipient's expectations occurs in the famous poem "Cat in an Empty Apartment." The genre of threnody would bring consolation. However, the uncompromisingly abandons the area of known answers. A seemingly detached description of the room, perceived through the eyes of a cat, exposes the scandal of death:

Nothing seems different here,  
 But nothing is the same.  
 Nothing has been moved,  
 But there's more space.  
 And at nighttime no lamps are lit (EB 296).

Objects remain in their place, but there is no presence there to connect them, only emptiness. The imperceptible difference is the essential difference. Until recently within the friendly circle of lamp light, thus tame and safe, the landscape of things after the death of a person undergoes a "destructive metamorphosis,"<sup>92</sup> an absence extended in time, and an experience of definitive departure, which the cat – doomed for anticipation – cannot imagine.

Dialog with the reader revises the ideas of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Here, those who go through a photograph album would like to discover a family secret, meanwhile "No one in this family has ever died of love./No food for myth and nothing magisterial" ("Family Album," NEF 115). People love myths, we like to listen and read about romantic love, but we reject the real course of events

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91 M. Janion, "Forma i śmierć. Mówienie o tym," in: *"Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś"*, Warszawa 1996, p. 65.

92 M. Stala, "Kot i puste mieszkanie. O jednym wierszu Wisławy Szymborskiej," in: *Druga strona. Notatki o poezji współczesnej*, Kraków 1997, p. 57.

that lacks the great ups and downs. Szymborska suspiciously refers to retouched testimonies of fate. She seems to repeat that only the real life hides real secrets. Greatness cannot do without smallness, tragedy faces comical everyday events, while compassionate sadness meets humor (see "Slapstick").

Freedom and grace of Szymborska's poetry serve serious anti-mythological persuasion. Time and again, it offers epistemological and metaphysical corrigenda. Considerations about the nature of being in the world, questions about the first principles, and enquiries about the sense of the seasons of our life cannot avoid the elementary experiences of everyday life. Thus, the correction of world-view works both ways. Moreover, there are two legislative instances: consciousness and the world. In order to receive acceptance, every truth in Szymborska's poetry must first pass through the trial of laughter, irony, and doubt.

### Figures of Reservation

World under revision is a metaphor, but not exclusively. For a narrower understanding, we must resort to the principles of traditional rhetoric. The semantic figure of speech, *correctio*, means to correct a previous judgment that proved insufficiently precise and suggestive. Moreover, it means "finding fault with a statement."<sup>93</sup> A correction of the "tone of the song," its emotional overtone, and its meaning. Let us consider the appeal form of Szymborska's early poem: "Hearts, do not sound the alarm/Sound the just anger!" ("Pieśń o zbrodniarzu wojennym," DŻ 20). Let us also quote a passage from the poem "Returning Birds," which presents the incomprehensible wastefulness of nature, which condemns generations of birds for annihilation:

This is not a dirge – no, it's only indignation.  
An angel made of earthbound protein,  
...  
falls down and lies beside a stone (NEF 139).

Szymborska sets corrections in this way: a dirge meets an ode, a silent protest becomes rapture over nature's masterpieces, which may even surpass the masterpieces of art. Her poetic statements come with the corrective "but." This figure has many shapes. It becomes the general principle of Szymborska's poetic language. What distinguishes her poetics is the supplementation and negation of judgments, the game of exemplifying, approximating, and elaborating.

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93 K. Burke, "Traditional Principles of Rhetoric," in: *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Los Angeles 1969, p. 67.

Sometimes, the rhythm of contradictory explanations sets the composition of a poem:

They say I looked back out of curiosity.  
 But I could have had other reasons.  
 I looked back mourning my silver bowl.  
 Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.  
 ...  
 I looked back in anger.  
 To savor their terrible fate.  
 I looked back for all the reasons given above ("Lot's Wife," LN 203).

*Genesis* (19: 26) devotes only one verse to Lot's wife. Szyborska's unique psychological apocrypha is constructed in such a way that there is no end to the biblical history. None of the explanations for the violation of the ban can be considered as final. And even the sum of the causes – rational, irrational, potential, imaginary – will not give us the desired clarity. What emerges from the multitude of hypotheses is a picture of an internally complicated human person. As Stanisław Barańczak reflects, this is a "poetic *humanization* of ordinary mythology."<sup>94</sup> Instead of a pattern of prohibition and punishment, there are dilemmas of an internally split person, who simultaneously is lonely, suffering, sensitive, and condemned to rejection and misunderstanding, deprived of the gift of consequences. As in "Lot's Wife," the poems "Streszczenie" (Summary) and "Soliloquy for Cassandra" describe that the awareness of humanity surfaces most strongly in time of catastrophe.

Szyborska's poetic language records cognitive hesitation. We may have the impression that the truths are only now being formed. The state of cognitive possession should be checked from the beginning. Szyborska exorcises habits and renounces routine. Human existence in her poetry is understood as a series of coincidences, breaks in nonexistence. In "Could Have," the attempt at anthropogenesis ends with the enumeration of events that explain nothing and, instead, testify to the rationalistic superstitions of the mind insensitive to the presence of mystery (of course, Szyborska's own position is the opposite). All that remains are word gestures that support the miracle of existence:

You were saved because you were the first.  
 You were saved because you were the last.

...

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94 S. Barańczak, "Posążek z soli," in: *Etyka i poetyka. Szkice 1970–1978*, Paryż 1979, p. 133.

As a result, because, although, despite.  
 What would have happened if a hand, a foot,  
 within an inch, a hairsbreadth from  
 an unfortunate coincidence (CH 155).

The individual case of saving from a catastrophe simultaneously becomes a generalized category of uncertain contradictory fate of each of us, and this fate stretches between a vague beginning and an unfinished finale.<sup>95</sup> We may think of Szymborska's poetic language like this: if words have a limited ability to express then, to describe an object, one should combine judgments into alternate arrangements to multiply explanations. However, if our language too quickly orders phenomena by eliminating ambiguities and multiple views, it is in such perception of linguistic tools that the area of doubt opens. In short, Szymborska rejects the "unconditional" mode of expression ("The Poet's Nightmare").

Relations between sentences composed of additions, supplements, or contradictions determine here the rules of poetic correction. Let us notice the important role of conjunctive expressions: "I know I'll be greeted by silence, but still./No uproar, no fanfare, no applause, but still./No alarm bells, and nothing alarming" ("Pursuit," CH 174). The rhetorical solution called aposiopesis opens the area of meaningful silence. The mind races here with an eternally fleeting mystery. With self-ironic charm, Szymborska fits the imagination with possible but absent explanations. Conjunctions contain the whole hypothetical argument about the need to fill the lunar emptiness with thoughts. Conjunctions are independent units of meaning and "operative words" that reveal the logical activity of the speaker, which indicate the "relativization of objects to each other."<sup>96</sup>

Szymborska's poems particularly highlight the operative words like "but," "yet," "despite," or "if;" they partake in the creation of the net of links between objects. Bold and innovative is her reevaluation of the economics of words. Szymborska applies new value to what the masters of brevity from Cracow avant-garde was "worthless."<sup>97</sup> Of course, Szymborska's condensation of sense remains intact. I call this semantic game the figure of reservation.

Disputatious dialog and convertive vision essentially gather in the inconspicuous statement of the words "yes, but." According to Szymborska, there always

95 Cf. S. Balbus, "Wszelki wypadek," in: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej*, eds. S. Balbus, D. Wojda, Kraków 1996, pp. 345–346.

96 I. Dąbska, "Niektóre pojęcia gramatyki w świecie logiki," in: *Szkice filozoficzne. Romanowi Ingardenowi w darze*, Warszawa-Kraków 1964, p. 236.

97 See T. Kłak, "Pośród świata," *Kamena* 20/1972. Also see J. Pieszczechowicz, "Póki żyję, nic mnie nie usprawiedliwia...", *Twórczość* 12/1972, pp. 90–91.

is another perspective on the issues under consideration. Let us again quote Barańczak: "All right, but.... This (usually unspoken, yet detectable) signal of mental objection is the crucial part of every poem of Szymborska."<sup>98</sup> Of course, we remember the abovementioned Norwid's poem "Clichés." Reservations as the starting point of poems reveal their affinity with conceptual wit, which unfolds in the discussed works into a series of dazzling logic games.

The conjunction "but" in Szymborska's poetry participates in the construction of paradoxes: "Good and evil –/they knew little of them, but knew all" ("Our Ancestors Short Lives," PB 252). Opposites are not mutually exclusive; the original norms of behavior left no doubt in the assessment of noble and vile acts, because they strictly delineated the taboo territory. We may say that the multiplication of moralist writings and ethical concepts in our civilized times excellently propagates the practice of evil; that is, moral relativism triumphs. Should we reverse Szymborska's opinion, the diagnosis of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century would say: good and evil – we know all about it, but know little.

Another poem, "Midsummer Night's Dream," suggests that the indicated route of rescue reveals the impossibility of escape:

Leave me, leave, but not by land.  
Swim off, swim, but not by sea.  
Fly off, fly away, my dear,  
but don't go near the air ("Midsummer Night's Dream," COY 52).

The elements are tainted with death like in the "Military Parade." Here we also see association with the shocking monolog of hope and despair in the poem "Some People." If there is an escape from deadly threats, it is only through fairy-tale metamorphoses. On the other hand, in a moving study of a panicked escape entitled "Labyrinth," Szymborska reverses the meaning of this cultural image and shows how the precision of definition neither calms nor erases fear. The trap of the labyrinth suspends ultimate destiny, while the exit only means the end of life: "There must be an exit somewhere,/.../But you don't look for it,/it looks for you" (C 378). Appositions only increase the fear. Anyway, let us point to the accelerated rhythm of enumerations with the modificatory "but," which means here another limitation of the possibilities of escape from the labyrinth and adoption of unfavorable rules:

and yes to all of this,  
then abruptly an abyss,

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98 S. Barańczak, "The Szymborska Phenomenon," *Salmagundi* 103/1994, p. 261.

an abyss, but a little bridge,  
 a little bridge, but shaky,  
 shaky, but the only,  
 there's no other ("Labirynt," C 377)

In a symmetrical sequence, subordinate clauses exclude the previous possibility by signaling the lack of the necessary complementation of the anthropological whole:

Here are plates but no appetite.  
 And wedding rings, but the requited love  
 has been gone now for some three hundred years ("Museum," S 62).

Objects exhibited in a museum live a life that is empty, unimportant, and somehow scandalous. The figure of reservation questions heartwarming illusions, also to reveal the imagination's game with nonexistence:

There's nothing on the walls...  
 Nothing, but nothing remaining  
 from a bison drawn in ocher....  
 Silence, but after voices.  
 Not a sluggish sort of silence ("Cave," NEF 147–148).

The image that emerges from nonexistence is created through cultural memory. Empty cave walls become a negative of, say, Lascaux paintings. The next link of reflection creates a return to the beginnings of our species. After all, philosophizing time and being here has biological and evolutionist foundations.<sup>99</sup> Szyborska's poem distinguishes "Nothing" from "humdrum nothingness." Her gaze fills the void again. The thought of the origins of our existence on earth inhabits no one's space. The circle of time closes. The words "silence," "dark," and "cold" enter the paradigm of opposite meanings. Thus, the figure of reservation serves to reconstruct what could but did not have to occur in this described space. The poem "Cave" has nonexistence paradoxically prove existence. The imagination is to overcome nothingness.

Szyborska's poems often utilize the figure of reservation in several elements, a series of refinements: "Everything the dead predicted has turned out completely different./Or a little bit different – which is to say, completely different" ("The Letters of the Dead," CH 162). Alternative here becomes equivalence – "or" changes into "which is to say" – which connects with the antithetic

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99 See C. Miłosz, "Poezja jako świadomość," *Teksty Drugie* 4/1991, p. 6.



pair “completely” and “a little bit.” The difference in degree ceases to exist. Asymmetry of semantics is becoming synonymous. We are wrong about the future, and the details cannot change much in the wrong forecasts. Our dead are poor and naive, but our divine usurpations are likewise pathetic, which results from the fact that we know what will come next, how the events will turn, and how the fates will change.

The figure of reservation refers to the experience of time. It opens up temporary and illusory paths that allow one to escape from the oppression of current experiences. Let us consider the poem “Going Home:” “He’s nearly forty, but not at the moment./He exists just as he did inside his mother’s womb” (CH 169). There is a shift in ontological status by an escape to sleep. Freudian regressive dream defends us from the troubles of life. The dream relieves fears and offers the luxury of freedom. In a separate area of oneiric reality, we may choose to agree or disagree with the historical and political subordination: “I’m the child of my age,/but I don’t have to be” (“In Praise of Dreams,” CH 187).

Reservations reveal similarity in difference. To approximate the omnipresent element of air that fills and surrounds us, heavenly, everyday, obvious, imperceptible, inconceivable, unencompassed, we may recall the image of a window, which is but a temporary label that we should immediately repeal: “A window minus sill, frame, and panes./An aperture, nothing more,/but wide open” (“Sky,” EB 5).

The semantic operations that place signs of modification at the center of poetic attention are strictly connected with ontological principles, since between different worlds of Szymborska’s poetry there occur relations of contrasting, penetrating, and excluding. This poetry reverses the hierarchy of grammar units. With mastery that astounds every user of the Polish language, Szymborska gives full right to transfer important meanings to conjunctions, adverbs of degree and measure, indefinite and numerical pronouns, and even the so-called additional emotional and intellectual determinants. Therefore, let us digress here to supplement the main argument. An important part in the formation of Szymborska’s poetic expression happens due to indefinite pronouns; or, in Polish specific subcategory of “disseminating” (*upowszechniające*) pronouns. Here are three examples: “Everything’s mine but just on loan” (“Travel Elegy,” S 70); “He wanders through darkness extinguished since never,/through emptiness opened to themselves forever” (“Dream,” S 95); “Talking with you is essential and impossible./Urgent in this hurried life/and postponed to never” (“The Silence of Plants,” M 330).

The oppositions “everything – nothing” and “never – always” poetically reflect on the extremes of existence. The alternative is: everything or nothing. Since we only perceive a small fragment of reality, we may but guess about the

missing rest. Since cognition is possible only from the standpoint of the individual "I," skeptical recognitions come to the fore: I know nothing, I understand anything, I will forget, I will not create with poetic word. We shall critically scrutinize Szyborska's negative categories in further chapters. For now, let us state that, for Szyborska, attempts to grasp everything always comes with the criticism of how conquerors think. The imperial success is the anxiety of seclusion: "Tarquinians where you'd least expect them, Etruscans on all sides./If that weren't enough, Volsinians and Veientians./.../Every new horizon threatens me" ("Voices," CH 160–161).

Time and again, we encounter in Szyborska's poems a display of grammatical categories. This happens at the expense of imagery, and this method of using linguistic figures evokes geometric precision. Thus, we may speak here about an excellent implementation of "poetry of grammar"<sup>100</sup> based on contemporary Polish language. Contingency clashes here with universal laws, exception argues with rules. The enigmatic miracle of particular existence finds counterpoint in the form of enclosure in the individual body and fate. However, the coldness of undefined pronouns turns in Szyborska's works into its opposite, because it expresses compassion – cordial and often helpless (e.g. "Some People"). This overcomes her distance toward specifics and makes possible such a semantic transposition: "Listen,/how your heart pounds inside me" ("Could Have," CH 155). The metaphor arises from the collision of pronouns. A separate existence recognizes its essence in empathy. With the help of such shifts in the system of speech, Szyborska achieves both brevity and discretion of expression.

It is the dynamics of grammatical categories which encompass new areas of meaning that is significant to Szyborska's poetry. Not only dissemination pronouns begin expressing particularities, but all indefinite pronouns surprise us with a strangely concrete meaning. Thus Szyborska expresses elementary astonishment, thus she confesses her sense of metaphysical eventuality:

I could have been someone  
much less separate....

Someone much less fortunate  
bred for my fur  
or Christmas dinner,  
something swimming under a square glass. ("Among the Multitudes," M 322).

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100 See R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," New York 1981, pp. 87–97.

The identity of the “I” appears here surrounded by other beings, no longer so distant or indifferent as to push them into the areas of the undefined. What is commonplace exchanges places with what is specific. A factual description would be useless for a gathering of all forms of events in all time-spaces. Hence, underspecification as a poetic figure seems to be the most adequate: “Whenever wherever whatever has happened/is written on waters of Babel” (“Water,” S 97).

Indefinite pronouns harshly and uncompromisingly name irrevocable catastrophes in the private and collective dimension. Some speak of the helplessness of the subject and the paralysis of actions in Szyborska’s poetry, or about belated compassion as the worst has already happened. The poetic language multiplies the vague possibilities of rescue as if it were falling into a helpless lethargic repetition-enchancement. This is what happens in “Without a Title.” We may find a similar construction “Some people:” “Something else will happen, only when and what./Someone will come at them, only when and who” (M 343).

The suspension of authoritative belief is not a game of an agnostic or an attempt to escape the first questions. There are too many uncertainties to say something for sure, too many conceivable cognitive perspectives to capture the description of the world in final formulas. We do not understand the language of the universe, nature, or history. We are condemned to search for the transitions between the personal self and the coordinates of life. Our attempts to break this duality only lead to virtual victories. We may only add further explanations to previous explanations; each one similarly uncertain.

We may find the rhythms of sentences composed of reservations – which expose the rhetorical figure of *correctio* – among other Polish poets like Zbigniew Herbert: “I will first describe myself/beginning with the head/or better with the left leg/or with the hand/or with the little finger of the left hand;”<sup>101</sup> or Urszula Koziół: “No wine’s open yet but there are only empty pitchers/There are only empty pitchers but there is no table.”<sup>102</sup> However, their figures of reservation are more incidental than in Szyborska’s poetry. Her poetic language highlights the figure of reservation because by using it not only frequently and in many combinations but also with a sensitive scale of differentiated meanings. We should not separate grammatical categories from poetic imaginations about the world. The correction of language in Szyborska’s poetry is twofold: it determines both the revaluation of grammatic norms and the diversity of relations between the components of the poetic world. Szyborska’s poems limit the

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101 Z. Herbert, “Próba opisu,” in: *Studium przedmiotu*, Wrocław 1997, p. 53.

102 U. Koziół, “W samo lato,” in: *Wybór wierszy*, Warszawa 1976, p. 64.

numerous alternatives of shapes and meanings by the ever-present element of doubt. Her program of poetic cognition conceals paradoxes, because it oscillates between the dream of universal competence and impossibility. I will discuss scope of negation and its meaning in the following section.

## Nonexistence, Nothingness, Nothing

What mean the words preceded by the sign of negation and the negative judgments that subvert what is certain? What mean the negations that reveal the difference of opinions with her textual interlocutors? What mean those negations that constitute negated worlds, those possible and complementary worlds that Szyborska directly juxtaposes with the available dimensions of existence? Critics already offered many answers to these complex questions.<sup>103</sup> Whatever Szyborska negates in the below poems, she calls it to live an "imaginary existence."<sup>104</sup> Whereas negation reveals her "fascination with the possible, conceivable manners of existence."<sup>105</sup>

Let us begin from words, from neologisms with the negative prefixes "no" or "without." Negation does not exclude the positive meaning, but it brings forth its particular aspect. What could be our role appears to Szyborska as an unfulfilled opportunity. For example, the protagonists of the poem "Without a Title" part in "un-love" (S 72), even if they wanted the opposite. The existential flaw of life is our short stay in this world, which so dramatically contrasts with the notion of eternity. The one who is "born" is immediately condemned to death. We may express this irrefutable metaphysical scandal in a conceptual, concise, and seemingly simplifying way – in the form of negation: "So this is his mother./.../The boat from which he stepped/into the world,/into un-eternity" ("Born," NEF 122).

The game between the negator and the negated differently unfolds in the word "nieumieranie" (literally "not-dying"). Here is the monkey's response to the Old Egyptian supplicant:

he'd sit and listen in archsilent peace:  
What do you want? A life that never ends [*nieumieranie*]?

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103 Among others, Balbus, "Światy możliwe," in: *Radość czytania Szyborskiej*; D. Wojda, "Przemilczenie a strategie negatywne," in: *Milczenie słowa. O poezji Wisławy Szyborskiej*, Kraków 1996; P. Michałowski, "Wisławy Szyborskiej poetyka zaprzeczeń," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2/1996.

104 Sandauer, "Na przykład Szyborska," p. 416.

105 J. Kwiatkowski, "Świat wśród nie-światów," in: *Remont pegazów*, Warszawa 1969, p. 100.

He'd turn his ruddy rump as if to say  
Such life he neither bans nor recommends ("The Monkey," S 59).

Death is everywhere in abundance, so the humble request is to stop this process. However, the word "immortality" would suggest divine qualities, and the speakers would not want to usurp this area. Therefore, it suffices to stop at the euphemistic "life that never ends." The deity responds enigmatically or not at all. Instead of his holy face, his followers witness the monkey's less dignified reverse. Szyborska's wit thrives in situations of helplessness and oppression. There leads a straight path from a joke to philosophical meditation.<sup>106</sup>

The neologism of "nonspace" appears in the environment of neutrally-sounding negated forms. Existence is a negative of nonexistence, the positive counterpart of nonbeing:

Time out from infinity for endless sky!  
Relief from nonspace in a shivering birch tree's shape!  
("Nothingness unseamed itself for me too..." CH 191)

Szyborska moves from what is unimaginable and distant to individual entities and then to descriptions of the world at hand. "Nonspace" would be – just like for Bolesław Leśmian – the equivalent of nothingness with an addition of a spatial shape.<sup>107</sup> That is, the starting point is nothingness while the ending point – existence. Let us notice how the negative side of the empiric engages in the area of common activities. For example, a figure on the canvas is "caught in mid-nonaction" ("Wrong Number," CH 157). This not a lack of activity but a specifically understood activity, a studied pose and in accordance with the rules of art. Thus, negation reveals the difference between the unchangeable duration in a painting and the movement and change in imperfect life.

The negative form does not annihilate things placed beyond the act of perception but bestows them with a separate consciousness. Our available perception works only within the limits of the human world. However, we cannot reconcile the subjective view – equipped with intellectual categories – with things' disorderly vision. It happens as if a described landscape returned to the first day of creation, when elements emerged from chaos and nothing had a name:

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106 R. Matuszewski, "O wierszach Wisławy Szyborskiej," in: *Z bliska. Szkice literackie*, Kraków 1981, pp. 236 ff.

107 M. Głowiński, "Leśmian: poezja przeczenia," in: *Zaświat przedstawiony. Szkice o poezji Bolesława Leśmiana*, Warszawa 1981, p. 153.

The window has a wonderful view of a lake,  
 but the view doesn't view itself.  
 It exists in this world  
 colorless, shapeless,  
 soundless, odorless, and painless....

And all this beneath a sky by nature skylless ("View with a Grain of Sand," PB 243).

We witness here an impressive variation of the language of paradox. Such expression is possible only in poetry, which peculiarly confronts cognitive attitudes by simultaneously giving voice to "I" and "not-I." The reverse of what is cognizable emerges from areas inaccessible to human cognition. The mind seeks order, it wants multiplicity to be transparent and defined, whereas the sphere of what is named rebels against such classifications. Existence beyond consciousness escapes not only names but also such "aprioric concepts" as time and space. The below passage is a subversive poetic exercise in Kantian philosophy:

Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.  
 But that's just our simile.  
 The character is invented, his haste is make-believe,  
 his news inhuman ("View with a Grain of Sand," PB 244).

Applied in practice, the conceptual apparatus suddenly curls and withers. The liberated powers of negation support humility and skepticism and help the imagination to reach other viewpoints. The lyrical "I" hosts in language an inhuman existence that cannot express itself. Thus, language should be accompanied by a symmetrical nonlanguage: the incomprehensible language of nature.

The situation from "View with a Grain of Sand" reminds of a dialog from another piece, "Conversation with a Stone." There surface differences in the degrees of perception: the initiation into the essence of the stone will never happen, because perception is not yet participation. The stone says: "You may get to know me, but you'll never know me through./My whole surface is turned toward you,/all my insides turned away" (S 104). A view that "does not see itself" cannot take sensual impressions, which is why their qualities only appear in the poem by negation. In the presented reversed optics, it is human abilities of perception that become exotic. In a later poem "The Silence of Plants" there unexpectedly appears the matter of "what seeing with two eyes is like" (M 329). The epistemological disagreement considered by Szyborska is reduced to the antinomy: nature does not see and does not judge itself, while people exceeded their natural surroundings, so they lack the "sense of participation."

So far, we have concentrated on neologisms. Let us now look at homonymy combined with negation. Szyborska's modification activates the hidden

dimensions of meaning. For example, “inimitable eyes” (“niebywałe oczy” in Polish original) from the poem “Census” (NEF 124) may mean “most unusual;” not so much rare or delightful but such that never existed or appeared in cultural texts. These are eyes of which we know nothing about. Similarly, “the chaos” (“nieład” in Polish original) in “Psalm” would literally mean “nonorder;” ergo is not about negating order in general but rejecting the artificial boundaries set by people against natural harmony.<sup>108</sup> Szyborska writes about such chaos of freedom – one that unfortunately only exists in the natural world – with satisfaction and approval: “Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos/prevaling on every continent!” (LN 201).

Among the negations, the word “absence” (in Polish original “nieobecność”) is especially popular in Szyborska’s poems:

Why, after all, this one and not the rest?...  
and why on earth, pinned down by this star’s pin?  
In spite of years of my not being here [*nieobecności*] (“Astonishment,” CH 177).

Subject to  
his own absence,  
on every front,  
at any moment (“Born,” NEF 122).

Silence grew over him, without a voice’s scar.  
Absence mimicked the horizon (“Poem in Honor,” S 100).

They’ve given themselves up to endless  
(if not otherwise) silence.  
They’re only concerned with that  
(if only that)  
which their absence demands (“Elegiac Calculation,” KiP 19).

We perceive individual identity on the backdrop of nothingness. Presence in the world – which only temporarily suspends absence – becomes the subject of Szyborska’s constant concern. The ingenious inventor of zero disappeared beyond the horizon of oblivion – and we cannot recover even a particle of his mysterious life. However, we may fill the void with an ostentatious, invented story. In place of the nonexistent legend, there will appear a replacement text; an outline of an oriental mythic-mathematical story. Our unknown protagonist, “before he died he took to the desert/on a hundred-humped camel” (“Poem in

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108 For more, see the interpretation of “Psalm” in M. Głowiński, “Przestrzenne tematy i wariacje,” in: *Przestrzeń i literatura*, eds. M. Głowiński, A. Okopień-Sławińska, Wrocław 1978, pp. 92–95.

Honor," S 100). He discovered zero so that we can add these digits to the hump of the camel. In turn, the absence of the dead is filled with unknown activity. It is not the dead who inhabit the other side of the world of the living, but this is how our memory works. Absence in Szyborska's works is a relative and special state of suspended existence that often means "existence in memory."<sup>109</sup> Let us also recall the poetic impression of the absence of a city's inhabitants that refers to the memory of the ruins. The image of the deserted city is strong. The mirror "didn't reflect anybody's face,/no hands arranging hair,/no door across the room" ("Mirror," E 427).

Poetic metaphysics and epistemology in Szyborska's work feeds on the notions of nonbeing and nothingness. According to the philosopher Władysław Stróżewski, "nonbeing as a relative concept effects from the statement about the difference between a defined being and what is not being; in turn, nothingness is this nothing that results from the erasing function of negation applied to all existence."<sup>110</sup>

Let us first consider the opposite of being that is currently available. In the poem "Experiment," we observe on a cinematic screen the result of macabre experiment with a dog's head, which is detached from the body and attached to a life support apparatus that keeps it alive: "Its moist nose could tell/the smell of bacon from odorless oblivion" (LN 207). The head seeks life and its simple functions. That is, the head instinctively overcomes nonbeing. Even a dog immersed in nonexistence will only accept concrete impressions, because he cannot sniff their abstract reversals.

In the poem "Cave," "nothing" is a paradoxical proof of existence. This "nothing" transforms into "[a] heresy against humdrum nothingness" (NEF 147). What inhabits the cave is the imagination of the speaker-witness, who feels a strong relationship with the past of the human species and takes an imaginary journey to the beginnings of human history. Moreover, nothingness has a separate aesthetics, as "a Beautiful Nothing" appears here instead of paintings that could have been preserved in this place. The nature of being can only be viewed through the prism of nothingness:

Nothingness unseamed itself for me too.  
It turned itself wrong side out.

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109 Cf. P. Kunczewicz, "Chytróść rozumu (O poezji Wisławy Szyborskiej)," in: *Cień ręki. Szkice o poezji*, Łódź 1977, pp. 188–189.

110 W. Stróżewski, "Z problematyki negacji," in: *Szkice filozoficzne. Romanowi Ingardenowi w darze*, Warszawa 1964, p. 97.



How on earth did I end up here –  
 head to toe among the planets,  
 without a clue how I used not to be (“Nothingness unseamed itself for me too...”  
 CH 197).

Martin Heidegger taught that nothingness is a condition that allows for the revelation of the essence of being: “It is in the Being (Sein) of what-is that the nihilation of Nothing (das Nichten des Nichts) occurs;” “The question as to the what and wherefore of Nothing turns the thing questioned into its opposite.”<sup>111</sup> “Cave” actually repeats the question but not in the same conceptual language. “[N]ihilation of Nothing” and “[n]othingness unseamed” – the latter approximates metaphysical surprise to practical ordinariness. It nihilates nothingness like a fabric, and the result of this peculiar tailoring is existence planned to the smallest detail.<sup>112</sup> The world is the “[l]ocal in reverse” (CH 191) of nothingness that gains a spatial form and can be described in terms of physics. By analogy, can we imagine that the other side – in some sense an already known “anti-world” – is a symmetrical reflection of existing shapes? Nothingness is limited by the cognizable world and considerably reduced by Szymborska’s poem.

Szymborska’s poems make nothingness lose its power to annul by foregrounding the reflection about nothingness with deictic pronouns: “since wind is exactly what won’t blow there” (CH 191). Deixis evokes ready images. And although we cannot agree what nothingness looks like, the method of linguistic indication paradoxically refers to common knowledge: the “I” of the speaker and each reader. We do not remember own nonexistence. By means of double negation we discreetly proclaim the adoration of existence. To ask about nothingness is to question ourselves, but the answer is positive. On the side of existence, we rest from nothingness. There will be a place for a cricket, a sorrel leaf, and a drop of dew.

Words with a negative sign perform a joyful dance. Our world is the epiphanically experienced “[t]ime out from infinity for endless sky!/Relief from nonspace in a shivering birch tree’s shape!” (CH 191). Such poetic concepts that create spectacular variations should appear on the side of the gaping black emptiness. The metaphysical treaty of Szymborska’s poem transforms into a love poem, though love is inseparable from praise of existence. “Nothingness

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111 M. Heidegger, *Czym jest metafizyka?*, przeł. K. Pomian, w: M. Heidegger, *Budować Mieszkać Myśleć. Eseje wybrane*, wstęp i oprac. K. Michalski, Warszawa 1977, s. 39; 46.

112 J. Kwiatkowski, “Jeden wiersz Szymborskiej,” in: *Notatki o poezji i krytyce*, Kraków 1975, pp. 87–88.

unseamed itself for me too..." playfully suspends serious philosophizing, even though the lightness of expression does not diminish the gravity of its words and sentences. The philosophical subtext of this poem never disappears: "And it so happened that I'm here with you./And I really see nothing/usual in that" (CH 191). In this and other of Szymborska's works, love establishes the miracle of existence. Love is an argument against nothingness.<sup>113</sup>

Szymborska's concept to turn nothingness inside out approximates the truth about existence, which she treats as a gift. We should not neglect something as unusual as life. Thus, we may say that existence illuminates nothingness tested by imagination. The world perceived anew gains a special quality. It is a constant dream of poets to penetrate the world and encounter its mystery. There is a similar poem by Czesław Miłosz that uses the metaphor of the world as a fabric:

There, where the world is turned inside out,  
a heavy fabric embroidered with stars and beasts,  
you stroll, inspecting the trustworthy seams.<sup>114</sup>

On the inside, the ornamented zodiacal material hides traces of the Creator's hand, that is, the unknown rules of existence. Miłosz combines the thought of an inaccessible dimension of cognition with an ethical command, because when listening to the voice of angels and creating a picture of their imaginary walk, we should list our earthly duties. Let us add that Szymborska's angels perversely teach us distance and courage, since they distinguish early cinema burlesque from among the earthly arts. Perhaps the most important thing about the human condition is "this merriment dangling from terror" in ("Slapstick," EB 309).

Uttered nothingness is tamed nothingness. This is how Szymborska describes the role of poetry as a struggle against emptiness, as an ambition to limit the territory of nothingness: "When I pronounce the word Nothing,/I make something no nonbeing can hold" ("The Three Oddest Words," M 14). In Szymborska's poetry, nothingness is the beginning of every life, so we cannot ignore or disregard it. With "the reality of Nothing," as Heidegger would write, Szymborska blends metaphysical amazement. In this space, one meets unencompassable being.

Szymborska's thought and imagination turn toward our unknown beginnings. For her, the process of our emergence from nonbeing and "heading out of emptiness" ("Cave," NEF 147) run parallel. One must think of nothingness and someone's consciousness must play the complicated game of negation of

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113 Cf. T. Nyczek, *22 x Szymborska*, Poznań 1997, pp. 84–85.

114 C. Miłosz, *Wiersze*, Kraków 1984, Vol. II, p. 214 (poem from 1969, published in the book *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*, Paryż 1974; From the Rising of the Sun).

existence. Szymborska's human is a cosmic exile and rebel against nothingness. In "Cave," the virtuosity of negation has nothing to do with semantic games<sup>115</sup> or poetic rebuses. We may present the matter from the viewpoint of responsibility. As usual for Szymborska, her reasoning is paradoxical. In "One Version of Events," we choose what we could not choose, but still carefully consider the offer of life, like a promising and somewhat suspicious prospectus of a travel agency. We must long wait for the journey beyond the boundaries of nonexistence and probably should prepare well. Something that is created – a frail plant, a small animal, a human being – prevents the supreme reign of nothingness. In this space formed in the likeness of our world, there constantly "appears an embryo of shape, sense, something that *is not* but *is* – and it is important."<sup>116</sup>

Let us return to the vocabulary of negative categories in Szymborska's poetry. In addition to "nonbeing" and "nothingness" we encounter their synonyms like "emptiness," "vacuum," or "chasm" in such poems as "Cave," "No End of Fun," "Birthday," and "Autotomy." However, we also notice the prevalence of the word "nothing" (Pol. *nic*). This negative equivalent of "something" does not indicate any specific content, but does not exclude positive meanings in Szymborska's poetry. "Nothing" clarifies the scope of images, establishes relations between things, and eliminates guesses and errors. Let us give some examples:

[my] nonconvertible, unmetamorphic body [*nieprzemienne w nic*]:  
 I'm one-time-only to the marrow of my bones ("An Effort," COY 50).  
 cracker-box housing projects  
 nothing,  
 a helpless little tree ("Written in a Hotel," NEF 134).  
 Show me your nothing  
 that you've left behind  
 and I'll build from it a forest and a highway ("Archeology," PB 242)

"Nothing" appears here in strong positions: in the line break and in a separate line. We immediately notice that it stands out. In "An Effort," the crystallization of a person's identity excludes imagined metamorphoses and crosses the attempt of a Leśmian-like penetration into the cosmos of plants. The poem "Written in a Hotel" is not a poetic dissertation about bleak architecture but a

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115 Cf. A. van Nieuwerkerken, "Wisława Szymborska i cudowność odczarowanego świata," in: *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, Kraków 1998, pp. 363–364.

116 J. Jarzębski, "Kilka zdań o wstydzie istnienia," *Teksty Drugie* 10/1991, p. 2 (emphasis by the author).

parable about destruction and survival. The lack of beautiful historic buildings as in Kyoto becomes a bad omen for cities like Hiroshima. The word "nothing" means "nothing special," no distinguishing features, but also establishes the difference ("that's not it"). However, the "nothing" in "Archeology" means "almost nothing" – for the uninitiated – but still visible and characteristic enough for specialized science to reconstruct the image of a civilization based on minute relics.

The use of negation in a poetic expression partially stylized as colloquial appears next to paradox:

Placed on the same pedestal for no good reason,  
drawn randomly from millions, but convinced  
it had to happen this way – in reward for what? For nothing.  
The light descends from nowhere ("True Love," CH 189).

True love becomes in Szyborska's poem a fulfilled impossibility, but this unjust distinction – criticized ironically – serves to appeal for the conscious experience of this enriching feeling. The speaker excludes an envious perspective. In this context, we may consider negation as an attempt to "escape unfulfilled expectations" and strengthen "human self-knowledge."<sup>117</sup>

Szyborska's complicated way of expressing thoughts through a double negation appears free and natural. She inscribes her manner in the course of everyday speech. However, such presentation of the state of affairs differs from direct indication: "Those frills or furbelows, however flounced and whirly,/barred no one from the family photographs" ("Family Album," NEF 115); "I know I won't be justified as long as I live" ("Under One Small Star," CH 193); "nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt" ("A Medieval Miniature," LN 214); "Small wonder, then, if we were struck with wonder" ("Surplus," PB 239). As we know, double negation leads to positive assertion, but the translation of the above fragments into the language of simple notifications would erase part of their semantic spectrum. As Piotr Michałowski argues: "by negating the exception, the speaker avoids generalizations and concentrates on what is "individual."<sup>118</sup>

To what is, a negative expression attaches the idea of what should be, suspects your knowledge, and exposes stereotypes. Wisława Szyborska avoids full negations. She definitely prefers partial negations. And so, her constructions of "nothing – but (for)" present an unfulfilled substitution for good and satisfactory solutions or – a lack of certainty and full knowledge. What would make

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117 K. Mętrak, "Wybieram odrzucając...", *Kultura* 19/1977.

118 P. Michałowski, "Wisławy Szyborskiej poetyka zaprzeczeń," p. 126.

a great solution is the intervention of other worlds, the entry of fairy tales and fantasy so as to overcome irrevocable facts. Meanwhile, the merciless real world disallows any improbability, even a bit of creative extravagance, or a pinch of convention: “Against the backdrop of the steadfast wall,/pitying one another, they both stare/into the mirror, but there’s nothing there/except their sensible reflections” (“Without a Title,” S 72). After a visit to the interior of a stone, only a poetic description would remain, not a properly documented scientific discovery. The potential revelation nihilates itself at the very beginning: “And my proof I was there/will be only words,/which no one will believe” (“Conversation with a Stone,” S 104). The modern sky is full of confusion, so August nights are not very good for fortune telling. The traditional and – as it turns out – naive idea about falling stars is supplemented with a guess, whether the illumination of the firmament does not mean sometimes a shipwreck disaster. We lost unequivocal explanations: “but can’t some twinkle in it explain: “I’m a spark, I swear, a flash that a comet shook loose/from its tail, just a bit of cosmic rubble”” (“Falling from the Sky,” CH 156). Perhaps this alludes to “only the spark” from Adam Mickiewicz’s famous monolog *Forefather’s Eve III*. In Szyborska’s poem, the meaning is different: it is a spark, but it also may be something else. That is how certainty about the starry August sky flashes and vanishes in an instant.

Negation promises richer expectations than fulfillment. Of course, even this rule is not safe from the laws of irony. Sometimes, it would be better for the range of events not to spread so widely. The act of distinguishing requires precise arguments. To convey a conviction that a well-experienced fleeting moment, a priceless gift for an individual, may be more important than great – good and bad – historical events, we must patiently explain the principles and conditions of such perception of the world. Although it violates accepted hierarchies, it does want to be exclusive: “Conspiracies aren’t the only things shrouded in silence./ Retinues of reasons don’t trail coronations alone” (“No Title Required,” EB 284). Here, the exclusion of great narratives indirectly serves the domination of the individual viewpoint.

Szyborska’s negation differentiates between the existing phenomena, connects thing, and distinguishes exceptions from rules. The latter quality may be viewed as her defense of the individual person from the tyranny of history and the giving of voice to the downtrodden, oppressed, and mute. Below, see a peculiar form of Szyborska’s double negation:

Nothing has changed.  
The body still trembles as it trembled  
before Rome was founded and after,  
in the twentieth century before and after Christ...

Nothing has changed.  
 Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.  
 The gesture of the hands shielding the head  
 has nonetheless remained the same ("Torture," PB 260).

Here, stability is painfully adamant, while we should consider changes and deviations should to be insignificant facts, because what only changes are the ways of torture. Torture was, is, and will be, while the body always reacts the same way. The discovery of identity in a series of negations more clearly exposes evil. Szyborska's constations in "Military Parade," "The Terrorist, He's Watching," and "Children of Our Age" along with "The Century's Decline," "Hatred," "Some People," and "Assasins" are only seemingly detached. In fact, they contain a fundamental disagreement, protest, and refusal of participation. Such negation receives an axiological and ethical dimension, whereas opposition to evil becomes a difficult affirmation of reality.<sup>119</sup>

Despite all this, we cannot overlook the nightmares of the twentieth century along with all the other black pages of history. Even quiet compassion, even a helpless complaint are important as continual dropping wears away the stone. However, maybe we can save some regions of the human world. Negation indicates exceptions and isolates the territories free from crime. Hope emerges cautiously, without premature enthusiasm, therefore credibly. Irony balances naïve optimism. We should explain our actions to inhuman beings, as they probably severely judge human actions:

Yeti, crime is not all  
 we're up to down there.  
 Yeti, not every sentence there  
 means death ("Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition," COY 48).

Szyborska's need for such troublesome explanations appeared in a clearly defined historical situation of the Polish October 1956, but nothing indicates that it ever lost for her its legitimacy. In one of her last poems, the reading of the human world by an intelligent machine exposes the play of uncertainty and untranslatability. This is what the researcher of extinct civilizations, maybe our cyborg-successor, says: "I still cannot explain precisely/the states called "feelings"" ("Confessions of a Reading Machine," E 419).

Szyborska's poetry also delineates the area of negative epistemology. Socratic attitude encompasses other worlds and dimensions of existence. For example, the evolutionary cycle remains unclear because we have lost some of

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119 See W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość*, Kraków 1981, p. 286.

its links. It is particularly complicated when we consider anthropogenesis. And what is this biological memory and connections of our tissues with the matter of the whole world? Szyborska finds a way to bring this issue closer: "I'm not even sure exactly where I left my claws,/who's got my fur coat, who's living in my shell" ("A Speech in the Lost-and-Found," CH 176). A separate oneiric reality has its features and flaws. Although the space was precisely created, nonbeing defeated, and the apparent details seemingly completed, the speaker is unsure about her emotional sensations: "We draw closer. In tears,/in smiles, I don't know" ("Dream," S 95). Szyborska's consideration of poetry continues in similar vein. The poet does not have to define anything because she stops at the demonstration of ignorance: "but what is poetry anyway? .../But I keep on not knowing, and I cling to that/like a redemptive handrail" ("Some People Like Poetry," EB 285).

In Szyborska's "Nobel Lecture," it is worth paying attention to the confession-comment: "This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended."<sup>120</sup> The last couplet from "A Note" sounds like a manifestation of internalized and enlightened ignorance: "and to keep on not knowing/something important" (M 349).

Szyborska's poetry establishes a peculiar symmetry: knowledge progresses alongside doubt. The less cognitive presumptuousness, the better. Such poetic reflection, based on methodical doubt, rejects unquestionable evidence and reveals exceptions in rules. It leads toward mystery and develops a special analytical sensitivity focused on the mysteries of existence. The questions it poses to the world(s) combine the ignorance of the individual and the general ignorance that we all inherited. Universal problems (metaphysical, existential) mix here with smaller dilemmas of everyday minutiae. Szyborska seems to argue that we should not respect such hierarchies and rankings. What is exceptional is any truly own subjective doubt.

Somebody else's ignorance – preferably from in a Franciscan manner – allows us to find appropriate distance to vain excitement and sensationalism, even if it had a historic or historical shape. As we read in "The Old Turtle's Dream:"

The old turtle dreams about a lettuce leaf,  
when by that leaf, the Emperor appears.

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120 W. Szyborska, "Nobel Lecture," <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1996/szyborska/lecture/> (15.02.2019).

A century hasn't changed him in the least.  
To the turtle it's an ordinary affair...

The doesn't know what he has witnessed.  
His childhood memories are slight (LN 206).

Mieczysław Jastrun's tortoise who cultivates perfect immobility is lulled by an immortal thought, when it dreams about the paradox of Zeno of Elea ("Żółw," Tortois, from the volume *Intonacje*, Intonations, 1962). Alexander Wat's tortoise sage discusses the wisdom of King Solomon, the highest degrees of Platonic love, and the bloody history of the twentieth century ("Żółw z Oxfordu," Oxford Tortoise). However, Szymborska's poem presents matters differently, because her turtle's longevity questions our obsession with history. The perspective here is ostentatiously peripheral – rather weird for us – but that is why the described ignorance may help with a distanced reflection about time. The transgression of anthropocentrism ("The Old Turtle's Dream," "Tarsier," "Alive") introduces an ironic view from the outside to expose the (relative) ridiculousness of human affairs and teach humility in the face of duration and its diversity forms.

The words "nonbeing," "nothingness," and "nothing" differentiate the layers of reality in Szymborska's poetry. Negative categories serve to determine the relationship between the components of different worlds. She constantly strives to implement order. We may incessantly supplement inventories of existence and nonexistence or catalogs of borderland entities, because we will never gather all the possible cases. Thus, such temporary suspension of the kaleidoscope of changes has an ironic undertone. In Szymborska's poetic world, like the poetry of Bolesław Leśmian, something may exist "less" or "more." In these relations, the vertical arrangement that determines the degrees of existence is complemented by the horizontal interpenetration of worlds. In any case, the substitutes of existence, traces of being, and uncertain testimonies exceed absolute nothingness:

One short step from eternal art into artificial eternity –  
I reluctantly admit that it's better than nothing  
and more fitting than otherwise ("Frozen Motion," CH 184).

If we say that something does not exist, Szymborska's poetry would explain that it does exist in a different way; or, as Bruno Schulz would say, in other "dimensions of being." It means not only negatives of the real world or presence in memory but also all the possible forms of human reality. The world with a minus sign is an annex to the existing order of things. Nonexistence reveals deficiencies in existence.



Szyborska's dictionary of negative categories includes many entries and – what we notice without statistical research – negated forms occur much more often than in standard Polish.<sup>121</sup> Negations constitute a very important element of Szyborska's poetics and rhetoric. Such forms appear in various text configurations: negative plots (e.g. "The Railroad Station," "A Medieval Miniature"), confrontations of artifacts and texts with things and images (e.g. "Mirror," "Map"), monologs about alienation and individual presence (e.g. "An Unexpected Meeting," "I am too close for him to dream of me...," "Thank-You Note"), and portraits (e.g. "In Praise of My Sister," "The Great Man's House," "Someone I've Been Watching for a While").

Wisława Szyborska treats nonexistence as the "other side" of existence – its alternative – while and negative cognition as invaluable knowledge of ignorance, without which we could not carefully learn about the world. Poetic reflections about the atrophy of values usually suggest that the values should exist. Szyborska eagerly studies the world's lining with imagination, considers the reality of possible beings, and desires to visit the "great empty halls" in which "there isn't any room" by penetrating the interior of a stone ("Conversation with a Stone," S 103–104). Szyborska avoids the appropriation of territories ontologically doubtful. Her cognitive stubbornness and humility overlap. In any case, we cannot speak about metaphysical indiscretion here. The negated world in her poems does not disappear. On the contrary, it gains in strength through various unclassifiable forms of being. "The existence and nonexistence of atomic facts is a reality."<sup>122</sup> In fact, as Szyborska writes, "I should have begun with this" (EB 281). Conceived and expressed nonbeing becomes a part of human reality, as poetry transfers nonbeing to the side of being: "When I pronounce the word Nothing,/I make something no nonbeing can hold" ("The Three Oddest Words," M 14).

## Contradiction and Tautology

So far, we considered the role of the semantics and categories of negations in Szyborska's poetry. Now, let us supplement the above by reflecting on her syntax, in which negation plays an important role. Szyborska variationally changes the ways of negation by constantly inventing new and unusual cases to successfully implement her poetics of negation. She sometimes modifies

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121 See the percentage calculation by P. Michałowski in his "Wisławy Szyborskiej poetyka zaprzeczeń," p. 125, where he applies the notion of "the escalation of negations."

122 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, transl. C. K. Ogden, 2.06.

readerly expectations and resists our inclination for classifications. Szymborska persistently discovers empty places in her own system, which she intends to fill.

Often, extended sentences serve Szymborska to dismiss broadly accepted beliefs; that is, she spitefully prepares evidence for their nonobviousness. For example, her speaker argues that Tanathos' grim power is limited ("On Death, Without Exaggeration"). Or, when considering intellectual censorship – during the Polish martial law period after the events of December 1981 – she applies irony to juxtapose depravation of minds with sexual indecency, by presenting the latter as less threatening to the authorities ("An Opinion on the Question of Pornography"). Moreover, an expedition in search of lost day, from which we cannot recover even a second, brings only negative answers ("May 16, 1973"). Next, the rhythm of successive negations expresses the skepticism about fundamental difficulties in playing the game called life ("One Version of Events"). Finally, the lecture on the conditions of earthly existence becomes the reverse of undefined or even nonexistent possibilities of living "elsewhere," in space ("Here").

Szymborska's mature poetry cannot do without dialog. Thinking about her interlocutor-reader, she successively develops a register of doubts. Her antitheses and paradoxes revise the certainties of thinking. More importantly, she foregrounds the mysterious aspects of everyday quasi-banal phenomena, often neglected due to their gray repetitiveness. From dissent, Szymborska moves to *iunctim*:

The Great Mother has no face.  
Why would the Great Mother need a face.  
The face cannot stay faithful to the body,  
the face disturbs the body, it is undivine ("A Paleolithic Fertility Fetish," NEF 145).

She considers here the dimensions of things that usually remain the matter of nebulous conjectures. The speaker persuades us that the lack of the Great Mother's face imagined in the Paleolithic statuette becomes her peculiar advantage and a proof of the ancient artist's genius intuition; as we should not focus on irrelevant details as reproduction is what is of utmost importance. Szymborska's poetry separates the human world from inhuman worlds. Judgments that distinguish people and condemn us to our own condition may not necessarily apply in other forms of existence:

The abyss doesn't divide us.  
The abyss surrounds us ("Autotomy," CH 183).  
  
They aren't obliged to vanish when we're gone.  
They don't have to be seen while sailing on ("Clouds," M 325).

It is only a custom of rhetoric that nature participates in human death. Szyborska wants to tame or valiantly accept the misery of a lonely departure – from the human perspective of death – by recalling the abysses of philosophers. She reminisces on Pascal's horror, existentialists' reflections on Being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), Mickiewicz's meditations from *Lausanne Lyrics*.

Szyborska's sentences often mark the transition from "no" to "yes." Then, the rhythm of contradictory sentences develops in parallel, without hierarchy. Their meanings should cancel each other, but Szyborska's poetry offers nothing of that sort. This poetry simultaneously considers things through the lens of existence and nonexistence, as if true empiric cognition comprised only vague guesses. As if hypotheses had the power to extract from nonbeing contentious facts and versions of events that are only fulfilled in assumptions. Szyborska's poetry rejects no scenario but also asserts no certainty. Arguments stem from detected contradictions:

They were or they weren't.  
On an island or not.  
An ocean or not an ocean  
swallowed them up or it didn't...

A meteor fell.  
Not a meteor.  
A volcano exploded.  
Not a volcano.  
Someone summoned something.  
Nothing was called.

On this more-or-less Atlantis ("Atlantis," COY 53).

Knowledge and ignorance meet in the short sentences with opposite meanings. The poetic definition of the mythical continent – "more-or-less Atlantis" – receives support from the idea of the model of infinity in the Möbius strip. Duration turns out to be limited, while the symbol of infinity emphasizes the sense of being lost in *longue durée*. Szyborska's above poem laconically summarizes the Platonic myth of Atlantis, its alleged grandeur, and its mysterious destruction. After all, there is no evidence for the existence of Atlantis. Its mythical inhabitants will remain, as Szyborska writes with conceptual charm, "Hypothetical. Dubious./ Uncommemorated./ Never extracted from air,/ fire, water, or earth" ("Atlantis," COY 53). They did not emerge from the elements of Presocratic philosophers.

This lack of ontological assignment is particularly fascinating. On the island of Atlantis – immersed in oblivion, stories, and speculations – neither love nor struggle have a distinctive shape. Likewise, the advice of wise men that stems

from the destruction of Atlantis will never become moral laws. Indication hesitates between "yes" and "no." Szymborska reflects on the suspended ontic status of the mythical island when discussing a Polish science-fiction classic by Ludwik Zajdler, *Atlantida*: "it does not matter if Atlantis existed or not, it still benefits us greatly. And not only scientifically. Also psychologically. We need Atlantis as an exercise for imagination. It would a shame to waste all imagination exclusively on practical matters" (WLN 74).

The impractical theme of Atlantis has important consequences. Considering that we cannot any part of the alternative in Szymborska's poem "Atlantis," there appears a world on the borderland of nonexistence, hypothetical and fulfilled.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps we are particularly proficient in solving disasters, for the destruction of Atlantis offers a whole range of possible causes. The question about the lost island turns into a reflection about the curious mind in search of a mystery.

However, we need no Atlantis to exercise imagination in contradictions. Suffice to consider something as ordinary and incomprehensible as death. "Elegiac Calculation" is a real concert of doubts, in which Szymborska explores contradictory meanings. From our perspective, we only witness the "death of another:"

It's all  
 (if that word's not too confining)  
 behind them now  
 (if not before them) – ...

They've given themselves up to endless  
 (if not otherwise) silence ("Elegiac Calculation," EB 294).

What is more illusory than attempts to delineate the boundaries of life, ultimate destinies, and infinite absences? Numerous periphrases of death can change into their opposites. In this field, we acutely learn the provisional character of language. Sentences in parentheses reveal equally true (or untrue) possibilities. In fact, we already near silence, because the poem returns to the starting point. We may compare this rule of poetics to the movement of a pendulum

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123 J. Kwiatkowski uses the notion of "the possible reality of uncertainty," in his "Przedmowa" in: W. Szymborska, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1977, p. 13. Critics apply Heisenberg's terminology when considering later poems from the volume *Could Have*. See P. Łaguna, "Pytania zadawane światu," *Magazyn Kulturalny* 3/1972, p. 33; M. Hendrykowski, "Nowy tomik Szymborskiej," *Nurt* 3/1973, p. 61.

that passes the way from a theorem to negation and back. However, contradiction encourages in this poem to reflection and – importantly – there occurs no semantic suicide.

The logical boundary of sentences shifts. Contradictions open new possibilities of expression that consider the state of suspended knowledge. Each claim has a negative equivalent. Judgments that something “is” and “is not” belong to a common paradigm. In the above examples, there emerges a separate ontological dimension: an alternative existence.

In the “Portrait of a Woman,” the cycle of contradictory opinions approximates colloquial communication practice:

She must be a variety.  
Change so that nothing will change....  
A screw loose and tough as nails.  
Curls up with Jaspers or *Ladies' Home Journal*.  
Can't figure out this bolt and builds a bridge....  
She must love him, or she's just plain stubborn.  
For better, for worse, for heaven's sake (LN 218).

The word is subject to the laws of the paradox. It is in these categories that one may best capture the antinomic arrangement of the images of feminine features. After all, this is a generalized portrait. Szyborska creates her psychological and sociological study from an explosive mixture of determination and inconsistency. Without such clash of strength and weakness, feelings and calculation, experience and ignorance, there would never surface the effect of such a playful, ironic game with the stereotype of a woman.<sup>124</sup> To paraphrase Boris Eikhenbaum, we will say that Akhmatova's “embodied oxymoron”<sup>125</sup> becomes an “exemplifying oxymoron” in Szyborska's “Portrait of a Woman,” composed of many cases, constructed to learn and play.

Everyday language abbreviates and tolerates contradiction. Szyborska exquisitely adapts these features for her own artistic purposes. This is how she speaks about the expansive, annihilating power of those who truly hate: “One religion or another –/whatever gets it ready, in position./One father land or another – whatever helps it get a running start” (“Hatred,” EB 288). A fast run

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124 See J. Bożyk, “Stereotyp czy ideał? Wokół interpretacji ‘Portretu kobiecego,’” in: *O wierszach Wisławy Szyborskiej. Szkice i interpretacje*, ed. J. Brzozowski, Łódź 1996, p. 85.

125 B. Eichenbaum, “Anna Achmatowa (próba analizy),” in: *Szkice o prozie i poezji*, transl. L. Pszczołowska, R. Zimand, Warszawa 1973, pp. 202–203.

toward destruction can be justified by anything, because it does not matter which words sanction evil. Ideas are just an excuse. Contradiction does not exclude high ideals here, but only compromises the language abuse.

Such contradictions lead not to nonsense. On the contrary, Szyborska makes them regain the ability to communicate information. Statements that play with logic are clearly explained in situations where the certainty of description is suspended. If we try to unravel the mystery and meaning of events, there will appear contradictions. The principle of incoherent explanations is used in building lyrical monologs, like in the poems "Could Have," "Snapshot of a Crowd," "Lot's Wife." Let us add that Szyborska's poetic aporiae strike with ingenuity and accuracy. Her rhetoric seeks to invalidate the borderland situation of the word. Thus, the abovementioned contradictions fulfill the usual obligations of meaning. The speaker simultaneously perceives the diverse reality "from all six sides" ("Into the Ark," PB 270), so that it seems to call for the language of the paradox.

For Szyborska, testing the limits of meaningful communication includes not only contradiction but also tautology. The latter can conduct judgments about reality even less than the former. However, this is not the case in Szyborska's poetry. According to logical semantics, both figures occupy a special place in the language structure. Ludwig Wittgenstein writes:

Tautology and contradiction are not pictures of the reality.... For the one allows every possible state of affairs, the other *none* .... Tautology and contradiction are the limiting cases of the combinations of symbols .... Contradiction is the external limit of the propositions, tautology their substanceless centre.<sup>126</sup>

Szyborska questions the "substanceless" center of sentences. Let us consider two examples:

He has only just learned to tell dreams from waking;  
only just realized that he is he;  
only just whittled with his hand *né fin* (NEF 150).

The chair's a chair, the wine is wine,  
in a wineglass that's the wineglass  
standing there by standing there.  
Only I'm imaginary,  
make-believe beyond belief,  
so fictitious that it hurts ("Over Wine," S 80).

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126 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.462, 4.66, 5.143.

The discovery of one's identity and the recognition of a separate "I" in the process of hominization is a fundamental revelation. "Poor little beggar./A human, if ever we saw one" (NEF 151) is what we first speak about ourselves, since the beginning of the world, in a flash of consciousness. Thus, instead of semantic emptiness, the statement "he is he" determines the fullness of self-knowledge.

In "Over Wine," the combination of several tautologies indicates the contrast between the permanent identity of things – confirmed by the repetition of the same words – and the uncertain image of the speaker. Changed in the eyes of her partner, she wants to check the durability of her new form, critically analyze her own portrait created by someone else. Here, Szymborska opposes the skeptical attitude with emotions. Of course, one would like to capture the fleeting moment of beautiful delusions, but it passes quickly. Only the existence of things is certain, but they do not take part in the metamorphosis and spoil the effect of love magic. When the miracle of the gaze passes, one should say goodbye to festive self-fashioning, abandon charm, tease, and wit. The return of common sense only confirms the knowledge of one's lonely existence in the world. "Over Wine" makes tautology distinguish the sphere of facts from infatuation and the theater of feelings. When considering Szymborska's use of tautology, we should pay attention to the paradox of perfection:

The cosmos is what it is –  
namely, perfect ("Warning," LN 221).

[Our skin is] an internal inferno,  
the anathema of anatomy...

Not for us such idiotic  
onionoid perfections ("The Onion," LN 223–224).

Compliance of the subject with its own essence does not set explicit requirements for cognitive attempts. Nothing can be added to perfection, but to uncertain and changing forms –very much so. When reading the paradox and irony in Szymborska's poem "The Onion," Adam Zagajewski notices that idiotism should mean "singularity" and "simplicity," while in Szymborska's poetry, perfection "can be realized only slowly, through struggle, and only by way of multiplicity and complexity, not simplicity."<sup>127</sup>

The subversive minds view Parmenides's perfect cosmos as boring. Attached to this world, the cosmic ironists of Szymborska will "take Thursday over infinity

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127 A. Zagajewski, "The Poetry of Freedom" [review of *A Large Number* by Wisława Szymborska], *Agni* 52/2000, p. 294.

any day" ("Warning," LN 222). There are shortcomings on both sides of the equation: we cannot eat cold abstraction but a specific Thursday cannot pretend to last eternally.

Of course, the onion is Szyborska's humorous model of regular perfection that, after all, stems from self-limitation. The human world is given development, the pursuit of something better, truth, and wisdom. Hence, true perfection can only be imperfect, as we always grasp it only in fragments.<sup>128</sup> The onion as a tautology precisely defines being that is "lazy," transparent, and identical with itself.

Onions boil down to "onionhood" (LN 223), "[n]othingness unseamed itself" (CH 191), while the real world "realizes itself." Szyborska writes that "Reality means reality:/that's a tougher nut to crack" ("The Real World," EB 292). It is tougher than what? Than the mystery of dreams. We are more-or-less talented authors of oneiric visions, whereas the real world exists in a completely objective and, therefore, cruel manner. The real world is a product of vigilance of an unknown absolute being. We do not have control over the whole of existence,<sup>129</sup> none of the real events can be erased, and, beforehand, nothing frightening can be tested, experienced, revoked, or annulled at the moment of awakening.

Despite its essence, tautology defines differences in Szyborska's poetry. After reading the sentence "Where Hiroshima had been/Hiroshima is again" ("Reality Demands," EB 290), we immediately recognize its meaning as it speaks of two cities: the one annihilated and the one rebuilt. The extraordinary character of the expression conceals a clear message that life always fills the void and, forgetting about the horror, develops on the battlefields just as it does elsewhere. In the poetry "Written in a Hotel," the tautology serves to oppose the beautiful Kyoto "whose beauty moves you to tears" (NEF 134) with an anonymous contemporary city, which unfortunately is ugly:

Fear strikes me  
only at times.  
On the road.  
In a strange city.

With garden-variety brick walls,  
a tower, old and ordinary ("Written in a Hotel," NEF 135).

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128 See W. Tatarkiewicz, "Paradoksy doskonałości," in: *O doskonałości*, Warszawa 1976, pp. 16–21.

129 See S. Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata. O Wisławie Szyborskiej*, Kraków 1996, p. 163 ff.



The ordinary wall differs from the beautiful wall, the ordinary tower stores in the background a comparison with an inspiring tower. A similar design will appear in "A Note" (from the volume *Salt*). However, in "Ballad," ordinary human activities after a murder turn out to be something extraordinary. This caesura separates spontaneous joy of everyday behavior from automatic gestures, which has the overtone of hopelessness: "She got up like you and me.//She walks just as people do" (S 79). Thus, the contexts reconstructed by the reader disallow the impression that artistic statement may meet an unorganized and excessive chatter or, on the other hand, nonsense.<sup>130</sup> Wittgenstein's "substanceless center" of tautology in Szyborska's poetry acquires content and becomes an important means of poetic expression. Such a subversive economy of meanings stems from Bolesław Leśmian. What Janusz Sławiński wrote about Leśmian highlights equally well the poetic practice of Szyborska:

If a paradoxical sentence identifies drastically different units of meaning ... then a tautological sentence multiplies versions of the same unit of meaning by granting each full rights of an individual. The paradoxical sentence talks identity into maximal diversification, while the tautological sentence derives diversity from identity.<sup>131</sup>

Let us consider an example of Szyborska's poetry, in which the protagonist is a child:

The Master rejects outright the ridiculous thought  
that a table out of sight goes on being a table nonstop,  
that a chair behind our backs stays stuck in chairlike bounds ...

A fly caught in a fly? A mouse trapped in a mouse?  
A dog never let off its latent chain ("Interview with a Child," CH 179)?

A very young great experimenter, a Master written with a capital initial letter, who fortunately still lacks cognitive routine, applies fantastic possibilities to the unchanging shapes of things. He does not agree for the all-segregating frames of existence and capture in just one form once and for all. Let us note in Szyborska's paronomasia the proximity of the formal prison to the suffering inflicted on animals (dog chain, mouse trap). In "Sky" the similarity of elocution conceals a different meaning: "I'm a trap within a trap,/an inhabited inhabitant,/an embrace embraced,/a question answering a question" (EB 282). We may read these mysterious confessions as a daily participation in the matters of the sky, as people's

130 Cf. D. Wojda, *Milczenie słowa w poezji Szyborskiej*, Kraków 1996, pp. 96–97.

131 J. Sławiński, "Semantyka poetycka Leśmiana," in: *Studia o Leśmianie*, eds. M. Głowiński, J. Sławiński, Warszawa 1971, p. 107.

connection with the boundless sky,<sup>132</sup> the air, the life-giving pneuma, but also the darker parts of existence; as the Polish word “niebo” simultaneously means “sky” and “heaven.” This poetic fragment gives the feeling of entrapment by a very lofty understood heaven, which does not become the “symbolic sunny goal of our lives.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, we should constantly repeat the sentence that Szymborska's poetry's philosophical quality derives from colloquial observations.

We may compare the above fragment from the “Interview with a Child” to Zbigniew Herbert's short piece “Objects.” Szymborska's childish variability of reality connects with the genius period of our lives, when nothing has been fixed yet in motionless rules and ontological boundaries remain fluid for the cognizer. Herbert complements this approach with insights about inanimate matter: “I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs.... I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.”<sup>134</sup>

A particularly interesting example of the above deliberations appears in Szymborska's “Aging Opera Singer:”

“Today he sings this way: tralala tra la.  
 But I sung it like this: tralala tra la.  
 Do you hear the difference?  
 And instead of standing here, he stands here  
 and looks this way, not this way,  
 although she comes flying in from over there,  
 not over there, and not like today rampa pampa pam,  
 but quite simply rampa pampa pam,  
 the unforgettable Tschubeck-Bombonieri,  
 only  
 who remembers her now –” (LN 215).

In this dialogical monolog, the word in the process of communication is only seemingly helpless. Admittedly, the record does not reveal the difference between the components of the aging singer's story – between his great past and the artistic misery of the present – but gestures that refer to the stage allude to such difference. Similarly, the quotations of musical phrases compel (textual and extra-textual) recipients to “hear the difference.” The area of incomprehension is

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132 See I. Smolka, “Byt ma swoją rację,” in: *Dziewięć światów. Współczesne poetki polskie*, Warszawa 1997, pp. 107–108.

133 M. Baranowska, “Jawa nie pierzcha,” in: *Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć... Szymborska i świat*, Wrocław 1996, p. 108.

134 Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems: 1956–1998*, New York 2014, p. 72.

somewhat filled with deictic pronouns and associated, almost visible, movements of the hand.

Szyborska masterfully plays here with the clumsiness of speech and the inadequacy of words. Excessive emotions probably make “the articulation of experiences ... grotesquely inept,”<sup>135</sup> while the insufficiency of communication comes not only from the nature of language. Noteworthy, memories appear here as mutually incompatible. The aging singer does remember the splendor of old glory, but the listener cannot (“Do you hear the difference?”, LN 215). The aging singer is stuck in a trap of unconveyable experience. The quotation marks aptly signalize that this poem is an elegy for the snows of yesteryear. And what can you do about a lament? Kindly accept the memory of the aging singer but not without erosive skepticism.

Szyborska undertakes an extraordinary experiment. She asks whether there one can extract meaning from a statement composed only of tautologies ended with a contradiction-paradox of an unforgettable-forgotten primadonna. Let us answer that there is plenty of meaning in such poem. Next to semantic meanders of live expression and alongside the speaker’s gestures that are to help his expression, we may carefully scrutinize the psychological situation of the aging singer. The distance between Szyborska’s “Aging Opera Singer” and the Polish drama’s classics nevertheless allows for a comparison with the monolog of the Old Actor from Stanisław Wyspiański’s third act of *Wyzwolenie* (Liberation): “I await nothing anymore.... I sought fame once, played Hamlet./There are new Hamlets today.”<sup>136</sup> Szyborska’s play with tautologies is lined with sadness, because there is something extremely wistful in the dusty souvenirs of fame, even if they only appear as memories.

Dorota Wojda is right when she lists Szyborska’s tautology among the “figures of silence” by concluding that the crippled ways of linguistic expression become “in Szyborska’s work undergo a nobilitation, because their textual position allows for a more complete expression, thus a secondary, partial removal of the deficiencies of speech.”<sup>137</sup>

In Szyborska’s poetic language, the precise tools of representation and expression – contradiction and tautology – overcome their contentlessness and eccentricity. That is, their positioning at the limits of meaningful articulation,

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135 L. Neuger, “Biedna Uppsala z odrobiną katedry,” in: *Radość czytania Szyborskiej. Wybór tekstów krytycznych*, eds. S. Balbus, D. Wojda, Kraków 1996, p. 131.

136 S. Wyspiański, *Wyzwolenie*, ed. A. Łempicka, Wrocław 1970, p. 196.

137 Wojda, *Milczenie słowa*, p. 103.

as if she completely disregarded such limitation of the two figures. In this particular case of artistic speech, we also cannot point to any peripheral areas of meaning. On the contrary, the subtly differentiation of the semantic scale in precisely individualized applications seems almost unbelievable. For Szyborska, contradiction and tautology could equally well switch places, because she discovers similarities in contradicting expressions and differences in tautological sentences.

### Phraseological Games

There is nothing more trivial than idiomatic phrases, like common truths in sentences that do not raise any doubts. There is nothing less sensational than adages remembered and repeated by generations. Proverbs assure us that the world is devoid of mystery, they record the general voice understood as the community of wise and experienced people. The user of proverbs does not have to admit any private illuminations or critical reflections.<sup>138</sup> Little new knowledge results from the tame quotes from culture. Once they enter the orbit of everyday speech, they very quickly wear out. We should also place maxims on the side of common sense, because concise and clear moral principles should apply to everyone. Common philosophy comes in a petrified linguistic form.

Proverbs and adages arranged themselves in finite series that confirm the well-established system of meanings and support the unchangeable by the seriousness of collective authority: their shape is exempted from time.<sup>139</sup> Common cognition faces scientific cognition, paremiology with its primitive and spontaneous philosophy of life opposes rationality. However, we may hardly argue that common sense always contradicts the critical operations of the mind. It does happen, but not exclusively. The universal dimension of proverbs, adages, and maxims separates itself from the language of a certain time or ideology. Everyone is interested in health and the weather, but the current (political) things move, integrate, or enslave only a given community or group. Language equally petrifies inventive and common thoughts, eternal truths and ad-hoc persuasive expressions. Therefore, the broadly understood modern times assumes a variety of phraseological material, of various provenance and trials, with a noble pedigree and of plebeian origin.

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138 T. Hołówka, "Co kryje się w przysłowiaach," in: *Myslenie potoczne. Heterogeniczność zdrowego rozsądku*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 125–135.

139 See A. J. Gremais, "Przysłowia i porzekadła," transl. J. Arnold. *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4/1978, pp. 309, 313.

Szyborska's interest in the phraseological resources of language appears even in her earliest poems. The early post-war poems narrate the common issue of leaving wartime and building a new order in an avant-garde manner, but there still appear colloquial idioms in the context of individual expressions. Such solutions distance these poems from Polish post-war slogans.

A few years later, during the Stalinist era, the ritualized and nondialogic language multiplied in numerous poetic replicas. Collective authority identified with the party's wisdom spoke to the people with the help of ritual sentences-spells. However, Szyborska's poems from the early 1950s freshened the agitational prefabricates with colloquial language and a few phraseological games. We may even call her works of that time as socialist realist *conceptismo*.

The neophyte enthusiasm that precedes Szyborska's tedious path of party self-improvement surfaces in her variation on the subject of "flash in the pan:" "The straw of burns in a flash" (DŻ 11). The persuasive possibilities of colloquial language gather in "Rozmowa ze sceptykiem" (Conversation with a Skeptic) who is not enthusiastic about the new times: "Neither defeat worries you/nor victory pleases" (PZS 24) In the exemplary biography of a young activist, Marxist revelation was immediately given, so he needed not wade through the Marx's writings: "Over the seven rivers of despair/over the seven peaks of lie" (PZS 13). Let us also point out Szyborska's poetic lecture for the young people who build Nowa Huta: "The class dies if it forgets" (DŻ 17). Proverb and aphorisms emerged in the above examples reinforce ideological correctness of expression just like colloquial idioms. This circle of language is closed. The attempts to renew the meanings of fixed word relationships are actually wasted. The dogma cannot be reformulated.

Szyborska abandoned collective faith in the *Calling Out to Yeti* (1957). However, what she retained was the negative context of all judgments pronounce exclusivity of worldview as permanent word groupings. To her last days, Szyborska always kept smashing stereotypes fixed in language and juggling idioms with not respect for the constraints of syntax and meaning. We should pay attention to how her revival of idioms creates language jokes.<sup>140</sup> Fragments of idioms stuck together create equally funny collages to those that Szyborska actually composes with scissors and glue. Language jokes surface from domesticated phrases, plastic jokes – from old engravings and postcards compiled in

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140 See T. Skubalanka, "Styl poetycki Wisławy Szyborskiej," in: *Herbert, Szyborska, Różewicz. Studia stylistyczne*, Lublin, pp. 85–86.

unexpected accuracy with sentences from newspapers.<sup>141</sup> Szymborska extracts an idiomatic expression, which metonymically adjoins and represents a worldview, in light of doubt and laughter to show its cognitive helplessness.

She puts side-spread words and truths in motion. Invariability provokes change, obviousness encourages doubt, certainty induces questions, a closed form incites a desire for a linguistic experiment. For example:

I've shed my skin, squandered vertebrae and legs,  
taken leave of my senses time and again.  
I've long since closed my third eye to all that,  
washed my fins of it and shrugged my branches ("A Speech at the Lost-and-Found," CH 176).

In the poem above, the impressive march of idioms tells a story about the evolution of the human species. The speaker of this spectacle of humanization presents an undressing of costumes from the "wardrobe of nature" in a gadabout manner. However, the most important action occurs in language. How many different language combinations appear in this poem at once! Suffice to mention delexicalization which treats metaphors literally ("I've shed my skin"), the exchange of elements in fixed wordings ("washed my fins" instead of "washed my hands;" "branches" replace "shoulders"), the mixing of new components, and finally the composition-syntactic operation of the rhythm of the enumeration. Transformed idioms form a sequence of two rhetorical triads. Moreover, the renewed meanings subordinate to one poetic idea: a humorous lecture on anthropology.

The "Everyman" of evolution experiences something extremely strange among ordinary things. We may call it anamnesis of personal experience of the past of species. In the poem "A Speech at the Lost-and-Found," the distance of the series of idioms from the theme is quite significant. Szymborska's material in everyday language appears on various occasions. What gives this poem its uniform meaning is the unusual poetic method of collage.<sup>142</sup> As in a linguistic joke, the impression of apt association overcomes the effect of alienation. Moreover, the difficult play with idioms is to sound casual and simple.

The above method hides the trick: condensed and shuffled idioms pretend to be natural expressions. Thus, they do not act ostentatiously. The quotes from

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141 Cf. M. Baranowska, "Fragment Cesarza od pięć po kolana," *Na Głos* 12/1993, pp. 75–76; and her "Pocztówka siostra liryki," in: *Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć...*, pp. 71–74.

142 See D. Wojda, *Milczenie słowa*, p. 77 ff.

different levels of culture has nothing to do with constructed concepts. Only a bit more careful reading reveals how important for Szyborska is the transformation of Polish phraseology. “Applied phraseology” is insufficient for her, not to mention that it is a grateful object of discrediting common truths.

In “A Speech at the Lost-and-Found” and other poems like “No End of Fun,” “The Suicide’s Room,” “Plotting with the Dead,” or “The Real World,” Szyborska refers to the ready-made components of speech to deny syntactical and semantical schemata, repurpose idioms to serve her own means, and transform them in her own order of expressions. In place of what is predictable, she introduces ambiguity. Let us consider the following examples of her reversal of the meaning of a permanent linguistic construction: “were different (we concur)/just as two drops of water are” (“Nothing Twice,” COY 25); “the stars .../winking at us/unintentionally” (“The Ball,” M 248); the delexication of the Polish idiom “świecić oczami” (to feel embarrassed on someone’s behalf) in “we light dark tunnels with our eyes” (“Dreams,” H 409); or “Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers” (“Psalm,” LN 201). The violated connectivity of words may look like a poetic extravaganza, but only if we treat them isolation from the elaborate semantics of whole statements. We will not find such connections in dictionaries, nor in the notations of literary and colloquial statements, but they still make sense in Szyborska’s poetry. We find examples even in her last volumes: “a masterpiece,/pretty supernatural and infranatural” (“A Forest Morality Play” from the volume *Colon*); “a specific watch, an entire fly” (“Dreams,” H 408); “A corpse of pork with departed cabbage” (“Compulsion,” E 424); “busy clouds in the wild air” (“Mirror,” E 427).

Szyborska’s play with idioms feed on colloquial and newspaper language, texts of culture, literary quotes, and maxims. We find in her poetry examples of paraphrases of well-known biblical verses: “With so much of nothing, razor-thin,/Hania would vanish in the Needle’s Eye” (“Hania,” COY 22); “Where not a stone still stands,/you can see the Ice Cream Man” (“Reality Demands,” EB 290); “*heaven and earth shall pass away,*/but not the number pi” (“Pi,” LN 233). Let us consider three references to the Saint Matthew’s Gospel (19: 24, 24: 2, 24: 35) respectively. The rephrasing of the forewarning to the rich leads to the conclusion that the eye of a needle should appear boundless for the poor (“Hania”). Next, the grim Bible prophecy turns into a positive program in the restoration of the world after war disaster (“Reality Demands”). Finally, things perish, but mathematical abstraction is indefinite, which the speaker indirectly compares with the eternal Word of God (“Pi”). Thus, Szyborska shows exceptions to rules, tests common sayings in new contexts, and simultaneously reveals that the traditional approach is not a universal key to explain phenomena.

She similarly activates literary quotes, as in "Beheading," in which Ophelia's line from the fourth act of *Hamlet* – "Under certain circumstances the owl is the baker's daughter" (NEF 130) – appears in a monolog divided between two voices of Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I that discuss torment and insecurity. But this phrase does not interpret the motives behind the actions of the two ambitious queens? Which one will win, and which lose? Which one is insane? Which is right? Maybe we should not ask such questions at all, because the poem divides evenly in half the experience of strangeness toward the role played in the theater of life.

In "Nothing Twice," Szyborska transforms Goethe's famous line from *Faust* about the moment of joy – "Verweile doch, du bist so schön" (Stay a while, you are so beautiful) – into its anti-thesis: "It's in its nature not to stay:/today is always gone tomorrow" (COY 25). The semantic reverse shows the benefits of the passing time, of life without trials and repetitions. In "Moment," Szyborska paraphrases Goethe again: "This moment reigns as far as the eye can reach./One of those earthly moments/invited to linger" ("Moment," M 321). Humanity may calmly contemplate its moment, because the furious elements of tectonics and meteorological disasters ceased, thus putting to rest anxiety of existence, for brief instant.

Szyborska quotes seemingly involuntarily, without forewarning or announcement. Her literary allusions pretend that they are no quotes. In "A Contribution to Statistics," Szyborska mentions a category of people "with whom you cannot joke around" and who number "forty and four" for each hundred.<sup>143</sup> Is this an effect of automatism or an excess? This famous quote from the Polish legislator of Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz, quickly disperses, as we guess that the category includes dangerous people: self-proclaimed messiahs, deliverers, and saviors of the fatherland.

Szyborska's poetic collages allow for a bizarre coexistence of various fragments of heterogeneous reality. Here, we see different stylistic levels complement each other. The sentences of sages and philosophers coexist with everyday speech and in different shape than the original one, usually attributed to the phenomena of individual adventures of the mind. Montaigne's formula "A stick branched/into a thicket of endings" ("A Note," S 102)<sup>144</sup> explains hominization

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143 W. Szyborska, "Przyczynek do statystyki," *Twórczość* 10/1996, p. 4. Szyborska removed this fragment in the volume *Moment* (2002).

144 The quote also appears in Szyborska's authorial introduction to her collection of poetry, see "Od autorki," in: *Poezje wybrane*, Warszawa 1967, pp. 5–6.



with the basic category of Szymborska's poetic philosophy, which is elementary astonishment with the world.

Human self-righteousness cherishes its brain so much and so strongly proclaims victory over the bones of extinct species as if each of us was a combination of Kant and Pascal: "Venerated Delegation,/the starry sky above the thinking reed/and moral law within it –" ("Dinosaur Skeleton," CH 173). What does this philosophical collage present? Does it present the mass occurrence of the "power of judgment," ethics, the value of culture, the power of reason, the greatness and freedom of people? If this is the case, the ironic effect is guaranteed.

What is also important in Szymborska's poetry is the subjectivization of philosophical reflection. The poem "Nothingness unseamed itself for me too..." is a metaphysical treatise, but quite special. Szymborska's "nothingness unseamed" evokes Heidegger but figuratively depicts the reverse fabric of the world available to human experience. The philosophical reflection from Sartre's *Being and nothingness* that we are alone and nothing justifies our actions assumes in Szymborska's version the shape of grammatical singular: "I know I won't be justified as long as I live" ("Under One Small Star," CH 193). The change is only seemingly slight. In place of a lecture on philosophical anthropology – a process that links the becoming of unidentified human existence with nothingness and absurdity<sup>145</sup> – we receive a much less general paradoxical meditation. In Szymborska's poem, the individual not only reveals own guilt and despair but also discovers the priceless fragments of hope and compassion, the seeds of joy and the meaning of life.

The stereotypes of newspaper language are very typical. Producing mass information, they discover nothing, they mean what they mean, and their persuasive effectiveness consists in limiting the elements that complicate the statement: the small number of syntagmatic combinations and paradigmatic choices. I omit the rituals of political newspeak here. Press releases along with radio and television messages offer set phraseological resources to automate perception. Ideological slogans are worthy of Szymborska's parody and paraphrase because they become obsolete too quickly. She is more interested in the more solid dimensions of reality described, for example, in the petrified language of statistics or meteorology. The large number gradually overtakes all areas of life, hence Szymborska's ironic conclusion: "To acquire political meaning/you don't even have to be human./Raw material will do,/or protein feed, or crude oil" ("Children of Our Age," PB 258).

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145 See W. Mackiewicz, *Człowiek miarą wszechrzeczy. Słynne sentencje filozofów*, Warszawa 1987, pp. 237–241.

Threadbare newspaper phraseology suddenly gains ambiguity in the above fragment. If politics devour individuals, the masses become "protein feed;" if statistics deals with typical and practical matters, the individual may be useful for secondary elaboration, therefore become a "raw material." Language joke and unpleasant truth merge here into a poetic whole. We may call Szyborska's rhetorical figure the metaphorization of set phrases.

Radio forecasts describe variable weather with invariable idioms. Such language is so very schematic that a large number of possible narratives, however limited, does not go exceed the convention. Szyborska replaces certainty that nature will do its work eternally with an epifanic amazement: "A run-of-the-mill miracle:/winds mild to moderate/turning gusty in storms" ("Miracle Fair," PB 274). How many times have we heard this? But this is why we should hear the difference between banality and illumination. The typical phrase in the new context does not refer to any series of phenomena but directs our attention to a unique moment.

The poem "Reality Demands" illuminates the weather forecast with idyllic content in comparison with another, ominous message, at least for no invalid: "and the blooming orchards near Verdun/cannot escape/the approaching atmospheric front" (EB 290). However, memory about the past in phrases like "frontline battle" or "frontal attack" colors the word "atmospheric front" with unexpected meaning. This is how Szyborska's poetic "premeditation" looks. In her "The Day After – Without Us," we immediately recognize the weather forecast language with threadbare phrases like "Gradually as the day progresses/high pressure fronts from the north/make local sunshine likely" (C 359). We must imagine that one sunny day in the future, which know not of our presence; suddenly an advice appears that breaks the cliché of forecasts: "those still living/should bring umbrellas" (C 359). Irony is a great tool here, as the meteorological statement unexpectedly reveals the metaphysical dimension of sense, with the use of everyday language. Szyborska utilizes the seemingly unproductive form of weather forecast in a surprising and inventive. We may say that these meteorological variations defamiliarize speech standards typically used for practical purposes. Threadbare phraseology returns here to the state of innocence, as if the combination of quoted words happened for the first time.

Colloquial idiomatic language in Szyborska's poetry is a whole other issue. Her tendency to immerse utterances in everyday speech becomes her way of literary presence that usually discredits the lofty utterances. Such style transforms divagation into conversation and recipients into speakers. Szyborska appreciates and employs the spontaneous creativity of colloquial words, but this only begins her the poetic games. Her use of everyday language breaks down the

rules of stage literary speech (“Soliloquy for Cassandra”), questions the style of lyrical travelogue (“Clochard”), and deprives a poetic treatise of its the seriousness (“Psalm”). The specific context modifies each idiom. The meaning of the whole does not disappear, but over it expands a whole other specific meaning of individual words.<sup>146</sup>

Let us consider ornithological examples. The enumeration of “every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers” (“Psalm,” LN 201) refers to the activity of a not very pedantic perception and classification, but also defines the freedom of nature, which does not submit itself to the boundaries of “man-made states.” Another piece investigates a dangerous scientific revelation. No one should learn about the result of the research, “not even the bird that might squeal in its song” (“Discovery,” CH 170).

Szyborska’s diversified view on phenomena combines with her choice of form. The measure of common sense recorded in colloquial phrases holds in check the lyrical fantasies and learned ideas for interpreting the world, but we must not forget that the agreement with the simple recipient usually appears in the company of irony. Szyborska believes that everyday speech and universal truths are only worth something when they serve as the basis for original poetic transformations. Disregarding the rigid syntax, Szyborska freely composes new wholes from colloquial expressions. Urszula Koziół elaborates of Szyborska’s technique by saying that idiomatic phrases “clash with each other in unexpected patterns to acquire clarity, freshness, and simultaneously imitate speech that is unforced, almost colloquial, and yet full of ... internal sparks.”<sup>147</sup>

The careless everyday expressions in Szyborska’s poems support her precision of expression. The impure matter of colloquial language transforms into a pure crystal. The poem “Funeral (II)” is the boldest realization of such tendency, because we deal here not with an incrustation of the text with everyday phrases, but with such a large accumulation of them so that other ways of expression disappear completely. This “poetry of voices” realizes here in a very bold manner. The unrelated issues during the funeral ritual are excerpts from dispersed colloquial talks, devoid of any celebration:

“these flowers need to be unwrapped”  
 “his brother’s heart gave out, too, it runs in the family”  
 “I’d never know you in that beard”  
 “he was asking for it, always mixed up in something”

146 See Barańczak, “Pośażek z soli,” p. 115.

147 U. Koziół, “Wisielka,” *Odra* 11/1996, p. 3.

"that new guy was going to make a speech, I don't see him"

"Kazek's in Warsaw, Tadek has gone abroad"

"you were smart, you brought the only umbrella" (PB 264).

Only quotes, a forest of quotation marks, but what mastery of assemblage. A polyphonic reportage extracted from colloquial Polish language; seemingly disorderly and quickly glued together as if someone drew the sentences from a hat. However, this chaos holds a transparent underlying order, because Szyborska arranges this socio-psychological study to use the language of a stressful funeral situation and indirectly transmit an important observation: the mourners especially avoid touching the essence of death. The further from the gist of the matter, the better; the closer to banalities, the safer. However, Szyborska plays on ambiguities. The mourners say "I'm going this way"/"we're not" (PB 265). But what is their goal: life to the end? We witness here an interesting withdraw of language from the circle of death. We read not maxims or lofty consolations, but colloquial phrases that have a therapeutic meaning for the speakers. The colloquial language reinforces the speakers in their existence and temporary hope.

Wśród rozpatrywanych rodzajów dialogu Szyborskiej z przysłowiami, przekadkami, maksymami, cytatami wyróżniają się aforyzmy jako starannie skonstruowane zdania, otwarte, dialogowe, krytyczne wobec prawd ogólnych. Aforyzm służy bowiem podkreśleniu konwertycznego widzenia świata. Przewycięża ugruntowany ogląd rzeczy. Widoczną w poezji Szyborskiej skłonność do układania aforyzmów uznać należy za kontrpunkt omawianych dotąd rozwiązań. Od strony sztuki formułowania myśli niczego nie brakuje aforyzmom Szyborskiej, gdyż są one dobrze skonstruowane, oparte na paradoksie, błyszczące mądrością i dowcipem. Wyjęte z poszczególnych utworów, pozbawione kontekstowych dookreśleń mogłyby złożyć się na niewielką antologię:

Szyborska dialogs with proverbs, maxims, and quotes, but aphorisms the rest as carefully constructed sentences, which are open, dialogic, and critical of general truths. Aphorism serves to emphasize the convertive view on the world. Aphorism overcomes well-established perspectives. We should consider Szyborska's tendency to arrange aphorisms as a counterpoint to her above solutions to everyday language. Szyborska's aphorisms lack nothing from the art of formulating thoughts, as they have proper construction, base on paradoxes, and emanate wisdom and wit. Extracted from individual poems, devoid of contextual refinements, they could form a small anthology:

We left the animals behind.

Who will leave us ("A Note," S 102).

Rejoice, O reason: instinct can err, too (“Returning Birds,” NEF 139).

among the signs of bestiality  
a clear conscience is number one (“In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself,”  
LN 227).

where hunger begins,  
innocence ends (“Compulsion,” E 424).

Perhaps all fields are battlefields (“Reality Demands,” EB 291).

Compared to clouds,  
life rests on solid ground (“Clouds,” M 324).

the book of events  
is always open halfway through (“Love at First Sight,” EB 303).

There’s no life  
that couldn’t be immortal  
if only for a moment (“On Death, Without Exaggeration,” PB 247).

The price, after all, for not having died already  
goes up not in leaps but step by step (“In Broad Daylight,” PB 250).

but observers from above  
are easily mistaken (“Perspective,” C 366).

There’s nothing more debauched than thinking (“An Opinion on the Question of  
Pornography,” PB 266).

We may supplement this collection with extracts from *Nonrequired Reading* and *Poczta Literacka* (Literary Post). I will limit myself to but a few examples: “He achieved in life nothing besides eternity” (LN I 9); “if we want people to believe us, we should be restrained” (PL 42); “Goodness is helpless without wits” (NR 79); “Even suffering has its favorite poses” (LN II 192); “Some snobbism is dramatic” (LN I 122); “you have to do more than love feet to make a good shoemaker” (PL 81); “There strong relationship between masterworks and kitsch is life-giving” (LN II 85); “We must write interestingly even about boredom” (PL 79).

We can even distinguish whole sections in the above incomplete collection of Szymborska’s aphorisms, which range from reflections on nature, history, life, and death through human characters, ways of cognizing the world, and deeds to virtues and vices, writing and literature, art and culture. Her wise skepticism, intellectual subversiveness, forgiving black humor, perceptive diagnoses, and accurate irony can successfully compete with Jerzy Stanisław Lec’s *Mysli nieuczesane* (Unkempt Thoughts). Szymborska’s aphorisms form understanding between her and the reader.

Aforyzmy, “apoftegmata i moralia”, jak również “subtelne eseje wierszem”, które lirykę przeciągają na stronę poezji myśli, jak notował Julian Przyboś w recenzji z tomu *Sto pociech*, to składniki odnowionej przez Szymborską formy “filozoficznej, refleksyjnej, gnomicznej”. Aforyzm wyczerpuje swą prawdę w sformułowaniu. Na aforyzm można odpowiedzieć przeciw-aforyzmem. Dobre zdanie aforystyczne, które “ma urodę błyskawicy” nieznacznie tylko przeważa tę szalę. Jak pisze Wisława Szymborska w związku z lekturą *Maksym i rozważań moralnych* La Rochefoucauld:

Aphorisms and “subtle essays in verse,” which draw poetry to the side of intellectual reflection – as Julian Przyboś notes in his review of the volume *No End of Fun* – compose Szymborska’s “philosophical, reflective, and gnostic” form.<sup>148</sup> An aphorism exhausts its truth in its expression. One can answer an aphorism only with an anti-aphorism. A good aphoristic sentence has “the beauty of a lightning.” Szymborska writes about her reading of La Rochefoucauld’s *Maxims*: “The most accurate have not more than fifty-one percent legitimation. And we should not expect anything more from them. Any attempt at conveying a human matter in a short formula is utopian” (LN III 223).

Szymborska considered the erosion of old wisdom and the lasting power of aphorisms on many occasions. In *Nonrequired Reading*, she writes about Chinese thinkers, comments on the gnostic sentences of La Rochefoucauld, Lichtenberg, Nietzsche, and quotes La Bruyère. In aphorisms, Szymborska particularly values lyricism, absurdity, and black humor. Here is what she notes about Lichtenberg: “His was not a simple-hearted rationalism, as he was drawn toward absurd and pure-nonsensical constructions. Some of his fragments should be today considered short prose poems, tiny lightnings of lyrical humor” (WLN 686). We recognize the elements of Szymborska’s own literary program in these sentences. For Szymborska, intellectual prowess and graceful shape of expressions are just a means to an end, never the end itself. Her rhetorical gnomes operate on equal terms with other sentences to convey meanings formed from the convolution of certainty and mistakes.

Szymborska’s poetry mostly plays with “ironic aphorisms that must be treated cum grano salis,”<sup>149</sup> which often appear as delicate pastiches of maxims, as her utterances are driven more by paradox as a general rule of expression. Adages

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148 J. Przyboś, “Poezja Szymborskiej,” *Nowe Książki* 5/1968, p. . 319.

149 M. Głowiński, “Jest wielkim poetą,” *Arkusze* 5/1995; and his “Opinia o twórczości Pani Wisławy Szymborskiej,” in: *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Wokół Szymborskiej*, Poznań 1996, p. 14.

will never appear in her works as decisive arguments, because common sense loses its convincing power the moment we scrutinize it thoroughly. However, Szyborska's paradox-driven poetry exceeds such delineated borders by drawing inventiveness from the petrified elements of language.

Against their essence, idioms under Szyborska's pen show a constant readiness to change. Cut, glued together, and offered in diverse collages, Szyborska's idioms reveal unexpected senses. We may read them not only as an indirect confession of an independent creative disposition but also as disagreement with collective habits, routine prescriptions for life, and belief in the magic of words. Her approach seems to embrace the rule that one should share one's style of reflection with others. Szyborska pacts with the recipient above the obvious things, while her lesson of ironic distance lacks pedagogic stiffness.

## **Repetitions and Enumerations: The Poetics of Inventory**

What plays an important role in Szyborska's poetic language are lexical and syntactic repetitions. The rigor of arranging words in transparent verses, in parallel and symmetrical sentences overcomes the disorder of colloquial speech. On the other hand, enumerations of diverse things, sometimes in strange combinations, highlight the futility of these ordering efforts. The lyrical "I" seeks to give meaning to crippled collections by pointing to hidden rules or ordering them arbitrarily. Then the sequences of things are subordinated to the euphonic qualities of words, the alphabet, some unique narrations about individual life, fictional narratives, and painterly representations. This list does not exhaust all the possibilities, for Szyborska's inventiveness in this respect is impressive.

The moving particles of reality constantly uncouple, and this loss of detail becomes a very important cognitive and artistic problem in Szyborska's poetry. The dramatic disproportion between an individual consciousness and diverse world does not disappear even under her layers of irony. Szyborska's resorts to a labyrinthine repertoire of repetitions. Thus, we should consider almost every poem separately. I forgo pedantic classification only to remark on opposing tendencies in her lyrical pieces. On the one hand, she displays ordering efforts while, on the other hand, unencompassable diversity. In well-developed phrases, Szyborska's poems repeat a syntactic pattern, a versification, or a sound effect. The sequence of enumerations persistently returns and accumulates, as if the number of epithets remained insufficient for the described phenomena and their potential incarnations. Perhaps such accumulation expresses an anxiety that the emptiness cannot be filled, that the hidden "nothing" will remain so visible despite our efforts ("Reality Demands").

Let us notice, Szyborska's signals of interrupting sequences that go on without end, as in the case of accusations of the previous century – the cruel totalitarian twentieth century – the catalog of faults and crimes is accompanied by the phrases “among other things,” “and so forth,” “for example,” “et cetera” (“The Century's Decline,” PB 256–257). It will remain the mystery of Szyborska's workshop, how she combines a decorative, nearly Baroque, style with an economy of words and asceticism in the means of expression.

Szyborska often reaches for rhetorical triads. In a conversation of lovers – a post-apocalyptic version of Shakespeare's comedy – transparent syntax collects nightmares and fears, as if each successive verse fulfilled a horror, only temporarily suspended yet very close:

Let's see each other through closed eyes.  
 Let's talk together through closed mouths.  
 Let's hold each other through a thick wall (“Midsummer Night's Dream,”  
 COY 52).

The poem “Alive” argues that the caring lovers, who lost the murderous instincts of mantis and spiders in the process of evolution, are “Hissed from our mysteries./Broken of our bloody wars./Stripped of female menace” (NEF 120). War refugees who fight for their lives would be better served by fairy-tale-like metamorphoses: “Some invisibility would come in handy,/some grayish stoniness,/or, better yet, some nonexistence” (“Some People,” M 343). In turn, Szyborska's reflection on words, ordering procedures, metatexts, or theater metaphictions often repeats the same syntactic structure three times: “There are catalogs of catalogs./There are poems about poems./There are plays about actors played by actors” (“Reciprocity,” E 430). Hence, triplets reoccur and abound in her poetry. They can create a compositional frame (e.g. “The Three Oddest Words”) or develop into a gradation system, so that each subsequent verse adds new information (“Theater Impressions”). One could go into details over such formal variations of statements with three elements as those in “Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition,” “Still,” “Report from the Hospital,” “Clochard,” “Landscape,” “Psalm,” “Nothingness unseamed itself for me too...;” not to mention the extensively intricate system of enumerations in “Sky,” “Reality Demands,” “Moment,” “An Occurrence,” “In a Mail Coach,” and “Compulsion.” Noteworthy, Szyborska's late poems abandon rhetorical symmetries and triads toward a regularity of freer structures.

Let us highlight the variety of rhetorical triads. Suffice to mention characteristics of protagonists mediated by things. Frying pans are halos, the knight is Saint George, and the dragon means the vanity of life. Indeed, the attributes of



gray and humble holiness are naïve (“Hania”). Another triad refers to past love, with a farewell scene that deteriorates into farce: “You’ll amuse them endlessly/ on the stage with your cravat/and your petty jealousy” (“Buffo,” COY 28). Let us consider the triads connected with gradation. In successive lines, the number of ingredients increases or diminishes:

I believe in the great discovery.

I believe in the man who will make the discovery.

I believe in the fear of the man who will make the discovery (“Discovery,” CH 170).

Yes, she loved him ver much. Yes, he was born that way.

Yes, she was standing by the prison wall that morning.

Yes, she heard the shots (“Pietà,” NEF 131).

Scientific discovery should annihilate itself, should it threaten the world (see Karel Čapek’s novel *Krakatit*). The addition of words in following lines imitates not only the process of inductive reasoning about the consequences of the discovery but also the increase of anxiety whether one’s secret of remorse will remain intact. More specifically, the poem raises the issue of the highest moral measure: of such grandeur that can give up success and fame in the name of shared values. Jan Prokop notes that “the repetition of a small number of elements contradicts here the plethora of possibilities. The text ... imposes its own organization and order. It stands on the other side of chaos, abundance, and excess.”<sup>150</sup> The same rules of poetic language apply to a series of helpless answers of the protagonist’s mother, which speak only to silence (“Pietà”). Her words only support the convention of conversation by creating a theater of understanding. Words cannot express her true regret.

Szyborska’s poetry utilizes chorus repetitions that activate the sound side of the expression and fuel its rhythm. Choruses refer to song genres. In “Commemoration,” the repetition emphasizes the litany-like form of love spells: “Swallow’s heart, have/mercy on them” (COY 30). In “Travel Elegy,” the chorus “Everything’s mine but just on loan” (S 70) is a prediction about the rules of the game of traveling and evokes cognitive reflection. We can keep but few memories, because irrevocable images escape into nonexistence. However, we can easily notice the mismatch of rhetorical structures to the type of messages: the language system and the strange cases. The former secure the order of the world, the latter seem to doubt this order.

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150 J. Prokop, “Wisława Szymborska: ‘Odkrycie,’” in *Liryka polska. Interpretacje*, eds. J. Prokop, J. Sławiński, Kraków 1971, p. 462.

The rich range of expressions means taking up the challenge to face the diversity of the world. However, this task presumes an awareness of loss. But can we express defeat in a more beautiful manner? When we read such poems as "Birthday," "Allegro ma Non Troppo," or "Miracle Fair," we suspend our beliefs in the linguistic limitations of poetry. If the excess of small miracles of existence – that each of us received at birth – is impossible to comprehend, then we should at least establish a euphonic order. We should then arrange the gifts not according to species or rank, but according to the sound of words:

So much world all at once — how it rustles and bustles!  
 Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels,  
 the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather —  
 how to line them all up, how to put them together?  
 All the thickets and crickets and creepers and creeks!  
 The beeches and leeches alone could take weeks ("Birthday," CH 178).

A poetic joke serves here a serious message. The excess of earthly (and mundane) illuminations and the overflow of cosmic phenomena is given to someone ill-prepared for the role of the chronicler of diversity. As Szyborska writes, "I am just passing through, it's a five-minute stop./I won't catch what is distant; what's too close, I'll mix up" ("Birthday," CH 178). Arent van Nieuwerkerken argues that

however, the imperfect mortal cannot commune with the fullness of existence that exceeds inconceivably.... The fullness of the world escapes ordering.... The impossibility of representing the full richness of the world may be explained by the unquestionable argument of common-sense logic that such representation would require an endless accumulation of particular impressions, while people live only for a brief moment.<sup>151</sup>

The poem "Birthday" arranges words in pairs and quadrants with admirable virtuosity, which simultaneously makes us laugh. In Szyborska's zoological-botanical variations, everything seems perfectly tuned, but words amaze us, as we never saw them in such combinations before. Her poetic lexicon fundamentally differs from the classifications of Carolus Linnaeus. Each particle of existence retains its separateness. A minute leaf or petal remains individual: "so aloofly precise and so fragilely proud" ("Brithday," CH 178).

The series of enumerations refer not only to real facts but also, as usual in Szyborska's poetry, to doubtful speculations. The organization (and naming) keeps to the natural course of things but treats fantasies with equal attention. Szyborska often employs parallelisms, lexical repetitions, and anaphoric rhythms. The dominant of multiplicity presents the "scattered wealth" of this

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151 van Nieuwerkerken, "Wisława Szyborska," p. 391.

world and all the possible worlds. Szymborska seeks to encompass with words as many individual existences as possible, to highlight the neglected cases of life, to sensitively respond to every manifestation of the fullness of being: to not despise the smallest creature of nature, which is to display the heights of bravery. Szymborska's poems show nature as countless, always interesting, and surprising the viewer with extravagant inventions (e.g. "Thomas Mann"). However, poetic indices of natural creations have a fundamental flaw: they are incomplete and limited by the individual viewpoint. The subjective horizon seems too narrow. As in the case of "A Large Number," in which the specific encounter with another human being immediately eliminates a huge number of other possible meetings, whereas every poem is created at the expense of unlimited unnamed things. Therefore, we seek to organize what is impossible to organize.

Szymborska's modern *conceptismo* best realizes in poetic definitions. Her metaphorical names are to indicate subtly captured similarities. Wit and distance defend Szymborska from the hermeticism of consciousness that only revels in its own inventions. Of course, the necessary prerequisite is to look with a fresh eye. For example, how many new observations can one gather about swallows? Witty periphrases harmonize here with the prayer apostrophes:

O swallow, cloud-borne thorn,  
 anchor of the air,  
 Icarus improved,  
 coattails in Assumption  
 O swallow, calligraphy,  
 clockhand minus minutes,  
 early ornithogothic,  
 heaven's cross-eyed glance ("Commemoration," COY 30–31).

The author of a similar poem "Jaskółki" (Swallows) from that time, Tadeusz Sułkowski, kept to homogeneous associations and used the terms "tanned misses," "little sisters of fish and cherries," "dancing little cloudy Ursula's."<sup>152</sup> Instead, Szymborska draws comparisons with a plethora of disciplines: from shipping, myth, and salon elegance to writing, art history, and optics. In "The Onion," she similarly multiplies concepts with virtuosity and play. Onions are to be "A centripetal fugue./Polyphony compressed./Nature's rotundest tummy" (LN 223–224).

Szymborska's enumerations and juxtaposition only seemingly give the impression of poetic excess but, in fact, they describe the diversity of cases,

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152 T. Sułkowski, *Tarcza. Wiersze i poematy*, ed. M. Sprusiński, Warszawa 1980, p. 79.

gather viewpoints, universalize fates and history. Peripheral observations add up to sudden syntheses: "With that ring in his nose, with that toga, that sweater.../ Poor little beggar./A human, if ever we saw one" ("No End of Fun," NEF 151). From possible situations and psychological properties, there emerges a diversified portrayal of a woman composed of paradoxes: "Her eyes are, as required, deep blue, gray,/dark, merry, full of pointless tears.../She'll bear him four children, no children, one" ("Portrait of a Woman," LN 218). Szyborska's antitheses here are amazingly consistent, and the range of possibilities offers something for everyone's experience.<sup>153</sup>

Wisława Szyborska conducts an informative game of classifications *à rebours*. For example, negation breaks down into partial negations. If observed from a nonhuman object-oriented perspective, a grain of sand appears to think something about itself: "It does just fine without a name,/whether general, particular,/permanent, passing,/incorrect, or apt" ("View with a Grain of Sand," PB 243).

The above issues refer Szyborska's operation on concrete things.<sup>154</sup> In "Still Life with a Balloon," things become prostheses of memory, but the dead objects extracted from oblivion only tell us that we cannot recover time. In "The Great Man's House," unique objects create an intimate aura around a great person (Goethe). Their species is of better quality than the serial products of our civilization. Things also confirm the solemnity of lives in the old style, which everything perceived as intentional and important. Death also leaves its mark on objects: as they unexpectedly change into unsettling junk ("The Classic," "Cat in an Empty Apartment"). However, in "Pursuit," we read a description of the contents of a garbage can, although an astronaut will not encounter such debris on the moon. We may precisely learn the contents of Isadora Duncan's purse ("Frozen Motion"). Finally, Szyborska arranges a catalog of museum collections ("Museum") and instruments in a cosmic laboratory ("Maybe All This").

Like Zbigniew Herbert, Szyborska emphasizes that literature should be faithful to objects. This point is important in her poetic theory and practice. For example, the Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz* is to be "the work of an inspired pedant! Marvellous and exact description of things, fashions, and ceremonies!"

153 J. Kwiatkowski calls this rule "the device of <delete as appropriate>," in his article: "Arcydzieła Szyborskiej," p. 120–121.

154 A. Wiatr writes more about objects in Szyborska's poetry in the book *Szyf poezji w piekle współczesności. Rzecz o Wisławie Szyborskiej*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 123–124; 142–143.

(WLN 525). And she praises Rilke in the following manner: “he proposed to introduce into poems the things that surround us, images from dreams, recollected objects.... We consider ... one of the most esoteric poets in the world and – what a surprise! – he greatly appreciated the things that we call ordinary!” (PL 54).

Szyborska’s cataloging of objects achieved its playful extremum in “Męskie gospodarstwo” (A Man’s Estate). The psychological characteristics of an independent man, – simultaneously benevolent, affectionate, and merciless – almost does not go beyond the space of a DIY studio. The artistic method of a catalog achieves its highest quality:

Drills, hammers, chisels, melting-pots, phials, pliers,  
bundles of strings and springs and umbrella wires,  
tubes that wrought up and glues that dried up  
jars large and small, in which something clouds up,  
a range of little stones, an anvil, a vice,  
an alarm clock and whatever fell out.<sup>155</sup>

The above fragment foregrounds Szyborska’s inventory poetics. Repetitions and enumerations include words, sentences, and entire compositions. They connect fragments of texts or cover all of them. Sequences of the same words gain different meaning (“In Heraclitus River,” “Military Parade”). Even a grammatical rule may create a set of repetitions, such as the conjugation of a verb: “You take off, we take off, they take off” (“Clothes,” PB 245). Other examples include the impersonal use of reflexive pronouns (“Ballad,” “Cat in an Empty Apartment”) or an unusual application of conditionals<sup>156</sup> (“In Broad Daylight”). We should also indicate the question and answer scheme, each time different (“Lesson,” “Vocabulary,” “Vietnam,” “The Old Professor,” “An Interview with Atropos”), or the questions themselves (“Plotting with the Dead,” “Maybe All This”). Listing and cataloging also includes human types represented by known historical figures (“Thoughts That Visit Me on Busy Streets”), the accumulation of detached expressions in a peculiar and very original poetry of voices (“The Tower of Babel,” “Funeral (II)”), as well as repetitions of apostrophes (“Thomas Mann,” “Dinosaur Skeleton”). The most radical forms of Szyborska’s inventory poetics include seemingly dry and ostentatiously anti-poetic enumerations of private data (“A Contribution to Statistics”) and compositions based on the repetition

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155 W. Szyborska, *Rymowanki dla dużych dzieci z wyklejankami autorki*, Kraków 2003, p. 37.

156 For more, see I. Smolka, “Byt ma swoją rację,” pp. 102–103.

of a single word: "I believe" ("Discovery"), "I prefer" ("Possibilities"), "as long as" (The Ball), "When" ("The Three Oddest Words").

Sometimes Szyborska replaces particulars with concepts and names. In unfavorable historical conditions (such as martial law in Poland), one has to subtly consider each word to convey the richness of sophisticated values and delicate distinctions. A poem, like Noah's ark, should save all of them:

Into the ark, all your chiaroscuros and half-tones,  
you details, ornaments, and whims,  
silly exceptions,  
forgotten signs,  
countless shades of the color gray ("Into the Ark," PB 270).

What is the role of repetition and enumeration in Wisława Szyborska's poems? First, they build exemplary and didactic elaboration<sup>157</sup> illustrated with well-chosen examples. Second, such poetic documentation provides facts, inspires the imagination, appeals to the intellect, and offers readers space for further deduction. Third, this anti-lyrical method resembles the composition of treatises, with their logically arrangement of theses, arguments, and conclusions.

Szyborska's enumerations side with negation, for instance, in the assumptions about the childhood of an anonymous person in "Poem in Honor." The speaker considers the shapes of emptiness and orphaned situations. However, this operation actually attempts to regain the lost or overlooked components of being. This is how Edward Balcerzan perceives the phenomenon of Szyborska's "poetic revindications:" "these verses – fertile with synonyms – diligently develop the lexical field of nonexistence, rejection, prohibition of existence, or forced annihilation."<sup>158</sup> The repealing and negation of such personal characteristics serves to characterize a noble outsider:

He doesn't arrive en masse.  
Doesn't gather gregariously.  
Doesn't convene communally.  
Doesn't celebrate congenially.  
  
Doesn't wrest from himself  
a choral voice ("Someone I've Been Watching for a While," E 417).

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157 E. Balcerzan calls this "educational rhetorics" and "explicatory rhetorics" in his article "W szkole życia," in his book *Śmiech pokoleń – płacz pokoleń*, Kraków 1997, pp. 113, 118.

158 E. Balcerzan, *W szkole świata. O poezji Wisławy Szyborskiej...*, p. 106.

From a range of possible situations, we may choose the right one: “Little girls – .../in the middle of dinner/in the middle of a book,/while studying the mirror/ may suddenly be taken off to Troy” (“A Moment in Troy,” S 63). The repertory of appearances and behaviors here is similar yet much richer, which constructs the diverse paradoxical description of the contemporary woman: “Her eyes are, as required, deep blue, gray,/dark, merry, full of pointless tears./She sleeps with him as if she’s first in line or the only one on earth./Shall bear him four children, no children, one” (“Portrait of a Woman,” LN 218). The antitheses make up a surprisingly cohesive image through inconsistency, but also through a set of possibilities that we may observe and take something for ourselves.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, Szyborska step-by-step eliminates stereotypes about a famous dancer are, which she expresses in a gracefully affectionate and old-fashioned style, tailored to the theme: “Not the drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the bacchante,/moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?” (“Frozen Motion,” CH 184). However, the shared semantic field emerges from nonsynonymical links, because Szyborska seeks subtle differentiation in this museum of impressions.

Systems of assertions and catalogs of preferences mix major and minor matters like in the poem “Possibilities,” which shows their close link to how Szyborska thinks about the world. In an innumerable wealth of choices, one would like to discover an order, although few facts from life experience offer such possibility<sup>160</sup> and, on the other hand, not relinquish the creative confusion, far better than imposed artificial (literary and social) forms. Szyborska appreciates the unpredictability of events. In her last, elegiac period, her inventory poetics grows stronger. Suffice to consider the works “Sky,” “Reality Demands,” “The Real World,” “Maybe All This,” “One Version of Events,” “The Ball,” and “Moment.”

Szyborska’s accomplishes her revision of language – the habits of social communication and the rules of literary work – by intensifying the influence of one property of speech over a repertoire of possible forms. Repetitions and enumerations gather in a relatively narrow area of figures and tropes. They could even appear monotonous, but not in Szyborska’s poetry. Rhythms, schemes, and combinations of repetitions are so differentiated in this poetry that they create a series of variations, which reveals a surprising number of solutions. The rhetoric of repetitions expresses the inimitable.

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159 J. Kwiatkowski calls this rule of enumeration “the devices of “delete where inapplicable”” in his article “Arcydzielka Szyborskiej,” in: *Radość czytania Szyborskiej*, pp. 120–121.

160 Cf. M. Stala, “Wolę możliwości. Trzeci raz o jednym wierszu Wisławy Szyborskiej,” in: *Druga strona*, pp. 66–69.





# **The Revision of Forms**



## IV Poetry and Painting

### The Styles of Painting – The Styles of Poetry

When reality freezes in the shape of an artistic message, it is only then that we may clearly arrange it and apply transparent interpretations. Literature, theater, painting, and music elaborate ordinary life by giving it a form; however, this form depends on changing aesthetic rules. Painterly representations are governed by the styles of particular eras. Szymborska reads the worlds created in artworks as constraints of choice: the rejected possibilities demand supplements and question what has is not presented and for what reasons.

However, Szymborska does not create compensatory escapes and approaches the aesthetic adoration of art with significant distance. The rules of Szymborska's poetic procedure are more complicated, as they supplement and process cultural texts. Her interpretations clearly seek to cross the boundaries defined by the theme and style of an artwork. She readily reaches for the testimonies of life captured in images according to the principles of convention. Suffice to indicate Szymborska's well-known poem "Rubens' Women," in which the lyrical diction, full of creativity and humor, corresponds to the language of painting as the "feast of abundance:"<sup>161</sup>

Daughters of the Baroque. Dough  
thickens in troughs, baths steam, wines blush,  
cloudy piglets careen across the sky,  
triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.

O pumpkin plump! O pumped-up corpulence  
inflated double by disrobing  
and tripled by your tumultuous poses!  
O fatty dishes of love (S 82)!

Parataxis creates the equivalent of an open painterly space, the expansion of verbs creates the illusion of movement, the rhythm of invocation imitates the magnificent ornamentation of paintings. Of course, I do not meticulously consider here the translation of these qualities from the field of art into poetic language.<sup>162</sup> The creation of style equivalents mostly depends on poetic ingenuity.

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161 M. Rzepińska, *Siedem wieków malarstwa europejskiego*, Wrocław 1988, pp. 228 ff.

162 About "intersemiotic translation" in the poem "Rubens' Women," see J. Grądział, "Świat sztuki w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2/1996, p. 97. Also

Szyborska discreetly inserts in the poem links to critical works about Rubens and to common opinions about his painting. Eugène Fromentin wrote in the nineteenth century about the “beauty peculiar to the time, a breadth befitting the races of the North, with a sort of grace peculiar to Rubens,”<sup>163</sup> while Rubens’ opponents criticized his heaps of Flemish meat, and Polish nineteenth-century critics perceived the tangled the bodies of “the naked fat immodest Dutchmen” as a slaughterhouse.<sup>164</sup> Modern colloquial Polish language still uses the phrase “Rubensian shapes.” Szyborska utilizes such associations to exceed them by showing the relativity of judgments and the passing of the canons of beauty.

Baroque in poetry used metaphors of distant associations, while *conceptismo* was to be surprising and bold. Thus, Szyborska describes the power of Rubens’ women with the help of extremely sophisticated images: “Titanettes, female fauna,/naked as the rumbling of barrels” (S 82). Moreover, she presents the acoustic equivalent of nudity as cavity and emptiness, not the charming excess of the female body.

We notice the Baroque style in “Rubens’ Women” in the elaborate gradations of epithet: “thick-whiskered Phoebus, on a sweaty steed,/riding straight into the seething bedchamber” (S 83). We witness this style not only in syntax and semantics of unexpected adjectives but also the mythological theme that itself refers to that paradigm. As if by the way, Szyborska arranges a literary joke about the Sarmatian (Old Polish) love of the Greek Olympus. Her poem associates sensual infatuation with an unsettling image of carnal bliss: “Their pupils have fled into flesh/and sound the glandular depths/from which yeast seeps into their blood” (S 82). “Dishes of love” that prepare themselves and await consumption seem to border on gluttony.

When Szyborska talks about the “pumped-up,” “double[d],” and “tripled” feminine acts, about the “bumps” of people, gods, and landscape, then she activates the specialized discourse about Baroque, as if in the background. These terms evoke the ornamentation, monumentality, multiplication of space, expansion of the curve line, and illusionism as the principle of painting. These features also refer to architecture of the time.

see E. Balcerzan, “Poezja jako semiotyka sztuki,” in: *Kręgi wtajemniczenia. Czytelnik-Badacz-Tłumacz-Pisarz*, Kraków 1982, pp. 149, 154.

163 E. Fromentin, *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland*, New York 1882, transl. Mary C. Robbins, p. 86.

164 I quote the opinions of Stanisław Witkiewicz and Michał Żmigrodzki after J. Białostocki, “Znaczenie Rubensa w dziejach sztuki europejskiej,” in: *Refleksje i syntezy ze świata sztuki. Cykl drugi*, Warszawa 1987, p. 127.

Rubens's painting is the quintessence of the Baroque style, especially his frequently depicted acts. We may consider the number of nude female characters in his works to be record high in all of art history. However, Szyborska's poem is not so much an ekphrasis as a perverse interpretation of the assumptions of Rubens' aesthetics. She explains that "Rubens's Women" "describes a style,"<sup>165</sup> with great attention. Polish art historian Jan Białostocki writes about the Rubens' Baroque iconosphere that with "thought images, he filled his contemporaries and posterity."<sup>166</sup> As proof, Białostocki quotes a line from Szyborska's "Ruben's Women."

We should probably consider Szyborska's poem as a reflection on a few Rubens' paintings.<sup>167</sup> For example, his *Diana and Nymphs Surprised by Satyrs*<sup>168</sup> or the *The Feast of Venus* perfectly illustrate the paradoxical heaviness of movement, the massive violence of pose, the dance of bodies and lines, and the wind moving the clouds. Perhaps the painting closest to Szyborska's poem is *The Disembarkation at Marseilles*, in which nymphs tow a ship with twisted bodies, against the waves, and tangled in ropes.

The artificial world of painting follows laws established by the eye and hand of the artist; there, everything is consistent: the variety of shapes and saturations of color, the sensual joy of movement and change. A moment later and the "cloudy piglets" would turn into victuals. In the flamboyant prosperity of Flemish painting, as Maria Rzepińska puts it, "This universal opulence of not only bodies but also landscapes and still lives is more a style than a reality."<sup>169</sup> And Szyborska masterfully reproduces this style in poetic language, although with the aim to subvert and undermine the wonderful unity of this painted world. Her description exceeds the subject, and there we will again find the anarchy of disorder. "Daughters of the Baroque," "pumpkin plump," and "pumped-up" contrast with the "skinny sisters" of Gothic art and the twentieth-century film and television screens. Rubens painted no slim women, so no one learns about their existence. They lead a hidden and dramatic life: they illegally inhabit the unpainted side of

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165 "Powrót do źródeł (rozmowa z Wisławą Szyborską)," in: K. Nastulanka, *Sami o sobie. Rozmowy z pisarzami i uczonymi*, Warszawa 1975, p. 306.

166 Białostocki, "Znaczenie Rubensa," p. 134.

167 For the list of paintings as "pre-texts," see E. Dąbrowska, "Wisławy Szyborskiej poetycka sztuka "przekładu" sztuki," in: *Wisława Szyborska. Tradice – současnost – recepcje...*, p. 48.

168 Cf. M. Karwala, "Wisława Szyborska. Autorka "paru wierszy,"" in: *Polska poezja XX wieku. Klucze do interpretacji*, Kraków 2000, Vol. II, pp. 103–104.

169 Rzepińska, *Siedem wieków*, p. 229.

the canvas. Szymborska's poem only takes into account the extremes, without intermediate representations: from the "bulge[d]" to the "unvoluptuous" (the Polish original "płaskie" literally means "flat"). Such polarized view also conveys matters important to painting. According to Winckelmann:

The noblest contour unites or circumscribes every component every component of natural and ideal beauty in the figures of the Greeks; or, rather, it is the supreme expression of both..../The great Rubens is far from having captured the Greek outline ..../ The dividing line between completeness and superfluity in nature is a fine one, and the greatest of modern masters have deviated too far in both directions from this intangible mean. Those who have tried to avoid an emaciated contour have erred on the side of corpulence, while others have made their figures excessively lean.<sup>170</sup>

Of course, Szymborska does not consider any "deviations" of nonclassical art or the problem of losing a perfect aesthetic pattern, but she ponders instead on the relativity of aesthetic conventions and the limited image of reality in artworks. She is interested exactly in what exceeds the limits of style. Her poetic imagination evokes the images that Rubens did not consider painting. These additions would violate the aesthetic canon. We may imagine a similar poem about women by Hugo van der Goes or Dirk Bouts, which would then present those, which for Rubens were "exiled by style" (S 83).

The criterion that corrects painted reality is life itself in all its diversity. We may admire the ideals of beauty or wonder at past tastes, but we should not treat them as precise representations, since we cannot even prove that Rubens's preferences in the selection of models correspond to the tastes of the people of that era. To get closer to the truth, we should sacrifice art's beautiful lies. What also interests Szymborska is the psychology of the painters of women. Her poem "Rubens' Women" is complemented by the sketch "Kobiety Klimta" (Klimt's Women):

I observe these portraits and ask myself whether these ladies really existed. They probably did, although they seem like a peculiar species of flora. They are like flowers who observe us from under squinted petals.... It is interesting; Art Nouveau was innovative, forward thinking in spatial compositions, and it unexpectedly mixed techniques or materials, but it also promoted an old-fashioned type of female beauty. Photographs of that time tell a different story. We already see on them women on bikes, skiing, driving

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170 J. J. Winckelmann, "Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks," transl. H. B. Nisbett, in: *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goethe*, ed. H. B. Nisbett, Cambridge 1985, pp. 39–40.

cars.... I have a hard time imagining that Klimt's women would do anything of that sort (WLN, 756–757).

Rubens's women as "fauna" turn here into Klimt's "flora." The figures of portrayed women – immersed in floral and aquatic elements, tired and dangerously seductive – appear to Szyborska trapped in Klimt's ornamental style of Art Nouveau. Klimt noticed the cultural shift in gender. He created the picture of Judith, whose emaciated body hides murderous energies. Nevertheless, Szyborska reveals the difference between Art Nouveau and other testimonies of the times, such as photography. Again, there is no clear transition between art and life. In short, Szyborska loves this kind of subversive unmaskings.

In the same vein operates "A Medieval Minature" from the volume *A Large Number*. In another humorous transposition of the painting form into poetic language, Szyborska emphasizes late gothic ornamentation. Again, we have no exact iconographic address but may follow Jerzy Kwiatkowski, who points to *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* by the Limbourg brothers.<sup>171</sup> We should only add that parts of Limbourg's manuscript that appear closest to Szyborska's poem are May and August from the Calendar cycle; although not all the details agree. Again, the question of the style of the miniatures comes to the fore:

Up the verdantest of hills,  
in this most equestrian of pageants,  
wearing the silkiest of cloaks.

Toward a castle with seven towers,  
each of them by far the tallest.

In the foreground, a duke,  
most flatteringly unrotund;  
by his side, his duchess  
young and fair beyond compare....

Thus they proceed most pleasantly  
through this feudalest of realisms ("A Medieval Minature," LN 213–214).

The description of painterly reality is linked here with a reconstruction of the viewpoint assumed by the late medieval artworks. These works especially represented festive cavalcades, castles, and dresses, to inspire awe among the onlookers. According to Johann Huizinga, in the paintings of those times

we find the tendency to leave nothing without form, without figure, without ornament. The flamboyant style of architecture is like the postlude of an organist who cannot

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171 Kwiatkowski, "Arcydzieła Szyborskiej," p. 123.

conclude. It decomposes all the formal elements endlessly; it interlaces all the details; there is not a line which has not its counter-line. The form develops at the expense of the idea, the ornament grows rank, hiding all the lines and all the surfaces. A *horror vacui* reigns, always a symptom of artistic decline.<sup>172</sup>

In “A Medieval Miniature,” superlatives reflect the idealizing painterly order.<sup>173</sup> Since nothing can be of lower grade in such represented world, each of the towers of the residence is the tallest. Szymborska’s elaborate sentence composed of enumerations resembles an bewildering structure of words. What is of great importance in this play with a masterpiece of manuscript illustration is the archaization of language,<sup>174</sup> including the lexis and syntax composed of inversions.

The evoked artwork brings partial knowledge about the late Middle Ages and preserves the festive image of life. The visualization of history through painting is very attractive but not very true about the times and the people. The simple-hearted reception of great and ornate things in Szymborska’s poem encounters remarks as if by art experts. It is so, because her poem masterfully employs irony: what is an important subject in Szymborska’s descriptions is what “apparently lacks” in painterly representations.

The knowledge about the dark sides of an epoch – usually overlooked by painters – questions the artistic vision. Szymborska adds the missing links again:

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,  
cross-eyed and out at elbows,  
is most manifestly left out of the scene.

Even the least pressing of questions,  
burgherish or peasantish,  
cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

And not even the eaglest of eyes  
could spy even the tiniest of gallows –  
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt (“A Medieval Miniature,” LN 214).

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172 J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, transl. F. Hopman, London 1987, pp. 237–238.

173 Cf. J. Grądział, “Świat sztuki,” p. 98.

174 About the relationships of conceptismo with archaic stylization in Szymborska’s poetry, see T. Skubalanka, “Styl poetycki Wisławy Szymborskiej,” in: *Herbert Szymborska Różewicz. Studia stylistyczne*, Lublin 2008, pp. 49–52.



We will find hell in other paintings, as both the search for beautiful life forms and the horrors of inferno defined the late medieval style. However, the boring everyday life could destroy these visions. Noteworthy, the aesthetics of ugliness is present in the Middle Ages, it only disappears during the late period. Thus, this correction only concerns “this feudalest of realisms” (LN 214); that is, the decadence of medieval culture.

Negative stories about painting in “Rubens’ Women,” “A Medieval Miniature,” and the mini-essay “Klimt’s Women” realize the rejected options. The conventionality of diagnoses about the world is revealed by comparison with the diverse and changing reality. We find a similar discussion with the schematization of life in art in “A Byzantine Mosaic.” The comical effect arises here from the transfer of the ascetic ideals of Byzantine art to the conversation between the two spouses from a mosaic: Theotropia and Theodendron. What is surprising and sincerely amusing here is the mixture of contempt for the bodily and ascetic practices with love confessions and eroticism. The characters retain the memory of their existence only within the boundaries of the world of art, thus within a specific aesthetic space; while stylization patterns remain conventional.

The language of the hieratic Byzantine visual art should seek the most archaic equivalents in poetry, therefore Szymborska travestises the first Polish sentence ever written – found the medieval *Book of Henryków* (1269–1273) – “I shall grind, and thou take a rest,” which reads in the poem as “I will confess anon, and thou shalt hear me” (NEF 128). Szymborska preserved here the melody and syntax of the original phrase. Moreover, the changed sentence conveys courtly behavior.

However, the origins of the Polish language help us only so much. Instead, we must recognize a pattern more important. The peculiar contradictory erotic-ascetic conversation also conveys an elaborate paraphrase of the dialog from the biblical *Song of Songs*. The King James Version reads: “Behold, thou art fair, my friend . . ./ Behold, thou art beautiful, my beloved!” (Song of Solomon I, 14–15). Szymborska’s paraphrase adds one element and transforms the adjectives: “How fair thou art, my hollow-cheeked beloved.”/“How fine art thou, blue-lipped spouse” (“A Byzantine Mosaic,” NEF 128). The language humor of such a combination is vivid. The initial idea of the poem develops into an anecdote, but also finds a stylistic continuation. What signals the “most perfect biblical song” – read as a love poem and not as an allegory of prophetic teachings – elsewhere appears with equal clarity: “Oh how it pleaseth me/to see my lady’s palms,/like unto palm leaves verily,/clasped to her mantle’s throat” (“A Byzantine Mosaic,” NEF 128).

The pattern is reversed. From lush beauty only pathetic dried debris remains, as if a herbarium of love. The association of women’s hands with palm leaves

probably refers to the mosaic from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe.<sup>175</sup> Both the biblical and the Byzantine bride arouse admiration and desire. Since everything is relative, spiritual values and a complete lack of sex appeal also have a tempting power. In Szymborska's poem, erotic tastes derive from two premises: the Christian culture of the Byzantine Empire ruled by theology – and art performances. Erotic game and courtly praise of asceticism complement each other: "Thou art so wondrous frail/beneath thy bell-like gown,/the alarum of which, if but removed,/would waken all my kingdom" ("A Byzantine Mosaic," NEF 128). Indeed, the dignity of rhetoric and erotica is an extremely terrifying (and ridiculous) mixture.

Szymborska's lyrical joke fulfills what is impossible to art. Let us remember that the dialog of the imperial couple occurs within the limits of a strictly defined style, whose rules the same dialog boldly violates. Szymborska heretic apocrypha unmasks itself because it speaks of matters that should remain unspoken. The secular theme in Byzantine mosaics is only an exception. They only allowed depictions of the imperial pair but not everyday events.<sup>176</sup> Meanwhile, the poem describes how the empress births a child "plump and merry," beautiful, and with "skin [a]s milk and roses," but these qualities only show our present expectations. Health and vitality are unmistakable signs of ugliness in the subversively reconstructed world of ascetic contempt for the mundane. What to do with the voluptuous rounded shape that illegally appears in this Byzantine art? It seems like exactly the same question as the one in "Rubens' Women." These works symmetrically complement their own deficiencies in the field of representing reality.

A high art scandal occurs on two planes: of form and philosophical beliefs. Szymborska jokingly projects a reversal of aesthetic onto moral rules. Her characters speak of sin and horror, but just one compromising detail restores life to their petrified rules. This sophisticated joke results from Szymborska's intellectual competence. In *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces*, she writes about Procopius' *Secret Story* and the Hans Wilhelm Haussing's *A History of Byzantine Civilization*. In her poem "A Byzantine Mozaic," we notice the atmosphere of a scandal to stem from the former text, while the latter instructed Szymborska in

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175 Cf. M. Czermińska, "Ekfrazy w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Teksty Drugie* 2–3/2003, pp. 237–238.

176 See M. W. Alpatow, *Historia sztuki*, Vol. II: *Średniowiecze*, transl. M. Kurecka i W. Wirpsza, Warszawa 1976, pp. 17–18.

the customs of the time, such as gnosis, the title of church dignitary, and female monasteries.

Questioning of cultural texts reveals the illusory nature of their truths and undermines their cognitive contents.<sup>177</sup> The order of convention crumbles as excluded images and themes return through art's back door. Szyborska's sophistication makes artistic conventions look naive. She asks questions from outside the protocol. She observes paintings only to ask them to represent ordinary unprotected life. Ludic attitude does not preclude serious reflection. In Szyborska's poetry, incomplete representations of facts in art omit many human torments, while the ordinary experience of astonishing life exposes the artistically improved versions of reality.

### **The Paradoxes of Time Transformations**

What irrevocably passed leads a crippled existence in our memory. And yet it disperses, loses clarity, and unceasingly degenerates. The perpetrator here is time. However, when it comes to the artistic representation of the world, we find an immobile stream of hours and years in a clear shape. Time is an important question in Szyborska's ekphrases. We should make use of this chance offered by painting. Even more, we should investigate how poetry can benefit from the petrification of things in paintings.

To what aim do people "make up little pictures" (PB 276)? Why the interest in artworks does not cease and audiences eagerly attend museums? Maybe people desire to discover something important about themselves by trying to recognize their reflections in paintings? Or, maybe they wish to create an illusion of an alternative life, in which there is no fear of the passing time? Do they want to overcome their troubles with identity, reconcile their alienation from the world? Or, do they wish to forget about the suffering of the mortals?

Wisława Szyborska tackles these issues with different literary genres and varying emotional tones. Her answers to the above questions often use philosophical joke that mixes ontological areas. She seems to experiment by not distinguishing between the world of artistic creation and the existing reality. These two worlds penetrate and modify each other. Szyborska challenges the belief in a beautiful utopia of independent reality not bound by the laws of time. I have already written about her correcting of a painter's vision, but sometimes Szyborska allows for the convention to remain unchanged. That is, we notice

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177 Cf. Sandauer, "Na przykład Szyborska," pp. 428–443.

no interventions into the world depicted by a painter. It is solely Szymborska's commentary that exceeds the habits of aesthetes and duties of art historians. Her commentary sometimes detaches itself from the painting and heads straight toward philosophical and psychological generalizations.

Let us concentrate on the poem "The People on The Bridge." This piece seems to utterly simplify – one could say: naively register – the description of a Japanese wood engraving by a nineteenth-century artist, Hiroshige Utagawa. Szymborska deliberately glosses over the painting technique, the subject matter, the epoch, and the context of Japanese culture. She does not seek to create an analog of Hiroshige Utagawa's<sup>178</sup> painting in a poetic language. Szymborska's account seems as laconic as possible, without imitating Japanese poetry like haiku or tanka. Instead, the poem is a register of an eye sensitive to painting:

What you see is water.  
 And one of its banks.  
 And a little boat sailing strenuously upstream.  
 And a bridge over the water, and people on the bridge.  
 It appears that the people are picking up their pace ("The People on the Bridge," PB 276).

The description assumes the familiar form of gradational enumeration. In successive verses, the phrase gets longer and receives more details, as the gaze becomes attracted by the crucial motive in the center of the painting. It is irrelevant that in Hiroshige Utagawa's painting the lone man struggles with the force of nature on a raft and not a canoe. Although, Szymborska also left out the intricate wooden construction of the dark brown bridge; the handrails in a lighter shade of brown; the gradation of water colors from light blue through navy blue to black; the vertical and diagonal lines of the rainfall; the protective reed umbrellas, round hats, a sack, barren feet of the passersby, who now increase their pace. However, the speaker voiced all that is important. Moreover, the premises of Japanese art precisely connect with Szymborska's intentions.

Here, Szymborska's intentions meet with the objectives of Japanese art and the meaning of Hiroshige Utagawa's wood engraving *Rain in Ohashi*.<sup>179</sup> Joanna Grądziel explains, that Utagawa was a "nineteenth-century Japanese painter who depicted daily street life and atmospheric visions of nature"; he was a master of

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178 Reproduced on the book cover of W. Szymborska, *People on the Bridge. Poems*. Introduced and translated by Adam Czerniawski, Boston 1990.

179 Czermińska, "Ekfrazy w poezji," p. 235.

a wood engraving technique called *ukiyoe*, which means “the depiction of the world which flows and passes away.”<sup>180</sup>

Szyborska’s agenda is to capture and tame the flow of time; to extract frail moment from the current of time. The speaker’s viewpoint is far from the usual frontal position of the viewer of an artwork. Instead, it is rather a vague gaze from the stars, full of astonishment. The observer from the outer space neither bothers about specialist terminology nor imitates the awe of the dwellers of the “strange planet.” In such optics, the artist is not an individual inscribed in cultural history but merely a representative of the human species. The species that does not accept the obvious laws of time and creates mirage-like forms of immortality over and over again. The poem scolds metaphysical mischief but, in fact, it praises the will of an artist who resists nothingness:

This picture is by no means innocent.  
Time has been stopped here.  
Its laws are no longer consulted.  
It has been relieved of its influence over the course of events.  
It has been ignored and insulted.

On account of a rebel,  
one Hiroshige Utagawa  
(a being who, by the way,  
died long ago and in due course),  
time has tripped and fallen down (“The People on the Bridge,” PB 276–277).

The shape of the world passes, and yet it is fixed in a painting. The insolence of the artist is punished. The price to pay is the rebel’s head, but the painting remains. It persists and reinforces the memory of its creator. In poetry about art, Szyborska considers the creation of crippled illegal eternity, because the act of artistic creation involves a transition from absence to presence, “artificial” but undeniable.<sup>181</sup>

If we desire to forget about the destructive workings of time, the admiration of artworks does not suffice. The best would be to free the aesthetic contemplation from respecting the boundaries between the two worlds: the one in front of the painting and the one within. In this piece by Szyborska, a sketch of the psychology of reception reveals a dream of eternal existence, of a moment that lasts forever. Some of those who admire the graphics of Hiroshige Utagawa,

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180 Grądziel, “Świat sztuki w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej,” p. 94.

181 E. Souriau, “Sztuka i sztuki,” transl. I. Wojnar, in: *Antologia współczesnej estetyki francuskiej*, ed. I. Wojnar, Warszawa 1980, p. 270.

They go so far as to hear the rain's spatter,  
to feel the cold drops on their necks and backs,  
they look at the bridge and the people on it  
as if they saw themselves there ("The People on the Bridge," PB 276–277).

The persistence in accepting delusions is astounding. When we empathize with others, we assume their experiences; in this case, the experiences of people depicted in an artwork, we consider their mental states to be theirs. But how does this happen? The improbability is validated. As the philosopher Roman Ingarden argues, we do not have such a sense organ that could perceive something that is not a thing with "sensual qualities."<sup>182</sup> Thus, we cannot receive the feelings of neighbors or the sensations presented in artworks. Nevertheless, Szymborska calls this unknown sense: "the sense of taking part" ("Conversation with a Stone," S 103).

On the other hand, this sphere of beautiful illusions, which hopes for art's perpetuity, highlights the duality that spans between the mind preoccupied with the idea of immortality and the fleeting existence of men. Szymborska's irony is peculiar because it does not deny the rebellious usurpations of artists and their recipients. Instead, her irony precisely (indirectly) supports the refusal to submit to the tyranny of time. Adam Czerniawski argues that in "The People on the Bridge" "Szymborska treats the picture as a springboard to her metaphysical speculations by using our admiration for invariability that the artist achieves amid the inexorable passage of time."<sup>183</sup> The identity of the time of existence and art is only a semblance, a delusion, a game. Szymborska expresses frozen movement in a painting with paradoxes. Something is moving but is stuck in place, someone is running but does not achieve her goal, someone embarks on a journey but stays at the beginning.

Hiroshige Utagawa's woodcut shows an event similar to ordinary life. Szymborska emphasizes the apprehension of movement, which we may understand as the moment's transition to the eternal time of art. "The People on the Bridge" apprehends the moment equally radically as in Szymborska's famous poem "The Joy of Writing." However, apart from dynamic representations of some events, painting shows "time filled with the continuous existence of objects or people who neither move nor do anything. It captures time as a duration."<sup>184</sup>

182 R. Ingarden, "Poglądy J. Volkelta na wczucie," in: *Studia z estetyki*, Vol. III, Warszawa 1970, p. 118.

183 [A. Czerniawski], "Szymborska," in: *World Authors 1980–85*, p. 816.

184 J. Białostocki, "Sposoby przedstawiania czasu w sztukach wizualnych," in: *Refleksje i syntezy*, pp. 55–56.

In turn, Szymborska's poetic variations on painting often contemplate stillness, immobility, and frozen motion. For instance, the faces of parents from a dream seem framed in chiaroscuro: "They appeared to me for a long, long, happy time ("Memory Finally," NEF 112). In one of the portraits appears "the young pawnbroker's bride .../caught in mid-nonaction" ("Wrong Number," CH 157). Monkeys chained to a window indifferently judge the evil of the human world ("Breughel's Two Monkeys"). Grażyna Borkowska briefly states that "the miracle of the world is the miracle of duration."<sup>185</sup>

For Szymborska, the moment of art's reception is an exclusion from existence, a kind of illegal freedom. An artist opposes the law of impermanence by capturing the moment and struggling for a place in the memory of culture. Szymborska's poem "Vermeer" (from the volume *Here*), the masterwork "The Milkmaid" from the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum becomes a metaphysical timer, which evaluates our hours and days. Thanks to the magic of painting, the everyday activity never ends. Time slowly flows in the trickle of milk. Vermeer simultaneously represents calm movement and duration. His attentive eye captured a small event, and his hand depicted a story about ordinary life, and how well! Therefore, Szymborska hopefully concludes that if great art lasts, then the world – worse than the one depicted – does not deserve destruction. We may juxtapose Szymborska's "Vermeer" with Adam Zagajewski's "Homeless New York", in which Vermeer's "The Music Lesson" fondly and forgivingly observes human madness with a divine eye. This masterpiece justifies the world, gives it meaning, and supports its existence.

We discover another painting time that lasts in the poem "Landscape." The translation of the everyday into an artwork's language eliminates here the unnecessary elements. In this poem, the orderly world is immediately ready. Only an outsider gains insight into it, a person aware of her own strangeness in this painted space. The speaker's monolog exchanges places with the woman depicted in the painting. The boundaries between two worlds draw apart:

In the old master's landscape,  
the trees have roots beneath the oil paint,  
the path undoubtedly reaches its goal,  
the signature is replaced by a stately blade of grass,  
it's a persuasive five in the afternoon,  
May has been gently, yet firmly, detained,  
so I've lingered, too. Why, of course, my dear,  
I am the woman there, under the ash tree.

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185 G. Borkowska, "Szymborska eks-centriczna," *Teksty Drugie* 4/1991, p. 49.

Just see how far behind I've left you,  
 see the white bonnet and the yellow skirt I wear,  
 see how I grip my basket so as not to slip out of the painting,  
 how I strut within another's fate  
 and rest awhile from living mysteries ("Landscape," NEF 113).

Szyborska's description brings to mind the works of such Dutch landscape painters as Jan van Goyen, Jacob Ruisdael, and Meindert Hobbema.<sup>186</sup> Their painting gives autonomy to the landscape and inscribes people in the world of nature. Human figures – mostly in the background – remain in frozen motion. Should we think of the precise inspiration for Szyborska's "Landscape," we might indicate Hobbema's "The Avenue at Middelharnis."<sup>187</sup> Why? The centrally placed long perspective of an ash avenue that ends with homesteads, the yellow skirt and white cap of a woman who talks to a man in red, a house on the right with a red roof, neatly separated lights and shadows of the spring afternoon. Szyborska even utilized the image of a conversation, as it assumes a new meaning when the dialog occurs between partners located on both sides of the frame.

Art critics often write about the intimate poetry and lyricism of Hobbema's paintings; and that nothing happens there, as the landscape motifs have the strongest influence on the recipient. Hobbema reliably represents the natural world – "the trees have roots beneath the oil paint" (NEF 113) – but also his joy and pride from the domestication of people in the landscape. What is the most important for Szyborska in the breathtaking masterpiece of simplicity<sup>188</sup> of "The Avenue at Middelharnis" is the sense of world order. We will find here no violence or anxiety. All represented elements have a clear meaning: they hold the joy of life.

In Szyborska's "Landscape," the speaker appears to be an amateur of art that becomes fascinated with Hobbema's painting. She simply considers the rules of his artistic game, nothing more. However, there quickly occurs a flight to the depths of the painting and a realization of a regressive dream of remaining oneself along with an abolition of existential worry. We may try and exchange own fate with the figure from the image, which is what the speaker from the twentieth century does, when she assumes the position of a Dutch burger from the

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186 Cf. E. Mikoś, "Przez sztukę dawnych lat widzieć siebie (O "Pejzażu" Wisławy Szyborskiej)," *Warsztaty Polonistyczne* 1/1993, pp. 47–49.

187 Cf. Czermińska, "Ekfrazy w poezji," p. 238.

188 H. Potterton, *The National Gallery London*, Londyn 1985, p. 117.



seventeenth century. The speaker grows accustomed with her new role, as she tries to master the language of axiology attributed to the virtuous and economical Dutch. However, this entails a reflection on the difference worldviews.

There appear two identities – “in front of the picture” and “in the picture;”<sup>189</sup> but we cannot reconcile the two perspectives. In the line “I strut within another’s fate,” we recognize a festive masquerade that becomes a philosophical calm and a test of *ataraxia*, equanimity, tranquility. Obviously, Szymborska would not be herself, if she did not set a mental trap here. The reverse of the “living mysteries” are dead mysteries, which means no mysteries at all, because such painting convention explains and displays everything.

The confrontation of the past *epistème* with the modern worldview will never end in harmony. Undoubtedly, the irony emerges here in the recitation of a catechism of truths, cognitive ambitions, and practical prescriptions. Not to mention the amazing cognitive certainty that results from automatically repeated maxims and recommendations. The woman confesses that “What I want to say is in ready-made phrases” (“Landscape,” NEF 114). Therefore, she needs not look for anything:

I know the world six miles around.  
I know the herbs and spells for every pain.  
God still looks down on the crown of my head.  
I still pray I won’t die suddenly.  
War is punishment and peace is a reward.  
Shameful dreams all come from Satan.  
My soul is as plain as the stone of a plum....

I never use despair, since it isn’t really mine,  
only given to me for safekeeping (“Landscape,” NEF 113–114).

The line of the horizon outlines the area of an orderly, safe, and meaningful world. In the middle of the private cosmos stands the house, while the vertical line drawn from this point leads to God. Home potions can heal suffering, whereas despair is an unknown state of mind. In this exclusion of melancholy, we notice an echo of Kierkegaard’s despair, the despair of twentieth-century existentialists, and a general hint at the absurdity of human endeavors. In the world of the woman from the painting, what triumphs is Protestant virtue, honesty, and sense of duty. It is not accidental, however, that the woman governs order. Erasmus of Rotterdam emphasized the almost absolute moral power that a Dutch woman held in the family; this power stemmed from her dexterity and

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189 For a more detailed interpretation, see J. Faryno, dz. cyt., s. 133 i n.

zeal.<sup>190</sup> We may only admire that order and envy our predecessors. However, let us note the signal of double awareness introduced by the word “still.” This harmony – unavailable to us – will soon fall apart. After the experiences of the twentieth century, the speaker must reject the idealized vision as too beautiful and unfortunately untrue.

The naive identification with the painted figure is a liberation of existence from the laws of time and a creation of a convenient asylum for the experiencing subject. Of course, the disguise is temporary, even if cognitively informative. Szymborska’s speaker wants to find herself in such sanctuary, without relinquishing her analytical inquisitiveness. To achieve such position, one needs sensibility and distance. Then, even a moment of reflection within the order of the Dutch landscape will reveal the truth about our misery of being in the world.

This conversation with someone who cannot penetrate the painted world is a dialogized monolog. Here appears an impressive paradox of an insignificant abyss: “Even if you bar my way,/even if you stare me in the face,/I’ll pass you by on the chasm’s edge, finer than a hair” (“Landscape,” NEF 114). The seeming proximity conceals a great separation. This fragment shifts the reading in yet another direction. The escape from the laws of time simultaneously becomes an escape from another, while another’s fate brings an even more intense experience of own existence, as if against the original assumption. According to Szymborska, only a solitary person can produce viable acts of reflection. However, the persons immediately risks losing her unique individuality within an interpersonal system. This dimension of “Landscape” brings this poem closer to such Szymborska’s pieces as “Nothing Twice,” “I am too close for him to dream of me...,” and “Thank-You Note.”

An individual cannot find oneself in successive reflections: neither in art nor in social interactions. The former orders existence, while the second disperses existence too much. “Landscape” alternately reveals the rules of artistic convention and the rules of life. The duration of a moment inside the picture contrasts with the linear time outside. The challenge to the autonomy of the landscape’s reality occurs here a bit differently than in “Rubens’ Women” and “A Medieval Mosaic.” Namely, the “unpainted” (NEF 114) stories appear in “Landscape” in a conventional artistic space. They happen inside the house, which occupies a very small part of the painting entitled “The Avenue at Middelharnis.” Thus, the poetic imagination opens up another world, one absent from the picture. The picture in the picture appears to be a story within a story:

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190 Cf. P. Zumthor, *Daily Life in Rembrandt’s Holland*, Stanford 1994.

The cat hops on a bench,  
 the sun gleams on a pewter jug,  
 a bony man sits at the table  
 fixing a clock ("Landscape," NEF 114).

Then everything follows the rules of art. The cat may be a detail in any Dutch painting, the reflection of light in a pitcher – a fragment of still life. Only the watchmaker appears to be a symbolic figure: an embodiment of death in Arcadia or the deity Chronos who set aside his scythe? The symbolism of transience sets in motion "artificial eternity" (CH 184) and reminds us of the return to the flowing time of mortals. We may view the picture's frozen moment as a defect of the mechanism, which no one can (thankfully) repair in an artwork. The established moment appears to the recipient in a form fixed once and for all. Szymborska projects our everyday horror onto that space. Destructive time flows and labors for death. The noble work of artists, just like the aesthetic contemplation of art, will change nothing. Szymborska's approach reminds us of the questions posed in Zagajewski's poem: "Tell us, Dutch painters, what will happen/.../when all the colours grow cold./Tell us what darkness is."<sup>191</sup>

Szymborska's landscape receives an unexpected supplement. The speaker's interference in the living basis of the painted world breaks its uniformity. Thus, Szymborska scrutinizes the consequences of freezing time and the limiting of worldview to a painting. She does not deprecate art's substitute immortality. Her irony only restores the right proportion between divine usurpation and ordinary human life.

## Paintings: Memory, Dream, History

We may summarize Szymborska's poetic method in this way: we can open paintings to surprises only if we exceed the integral laws of art, confront it with ordinary life, broaden with inconceivable representations, and disturb the ways of art reception. This will not harm paintings, as they will only gain new readings in a poetic language. However, to fulfil the cognitive advantage and playful satisfaction, what must precede the rebellion against the conventionality of art is the brilliant recognition of the distinctive features of each artistic convention. Although, let us not confuse liberty with arbitrariness.

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191 A. Zagajewski, *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, transl. C. Cavanagh, R. Gorczyński, B. Ivry, C. K. Williams, New York 2003, p. 222.

Szyborska treats the Old Masters as good friends, just as we treat all artists whose works help us live. Literary predecessors also make “friends in culture.”<sup>192</sup> Therefore, Szyborska may abandon the custom of solemn communion with art. In this situation, smug judgments would be tactlessness. A joke does not exclude empathic reception, subversion does not destroy hard-earned aesthetic experiences. Since the charitable presence of great artists in Szyborska’s poetry is so clear, the past of art must not be too distant from the present. Szyborska’s statements on painting are broad. They include not only seeing and experiencing but also the experience of existence and life’s wisdom.

I will concentrate here on problems of giving form to ordinary and everyday events with the help of references to artworks. The scattering of events merges painterly compositions. Thus, translation into the language of painting becomes significant, as it refers to cultural topoi by activating a collective imaginarium. The following group of Szyborska’s works convey not full ekphrases, as some of their determinants lack, such as the indication of a specific work, the painter’s name or genre,<sup>193</sup> or the subject of the poem are matters beyond the painting. The memoirs of dream fragments in the poem “Memory Finally” are remembered with the help of art, which helps them gain clarity and meaning. In this personal lyric we recognize the triad memory-dream-art.

Demons may inhabit dreams when the mind is asleep. We have no power over the madness of dreams. Everything can be deformed, even images of people closest to you. After a series of grotesque incarnations, the figures of parents in “Memory finally” appear according to expectations, like masterpieces of portrait painting. Chaos of dreams has been vanquished again: “In a dream, but somehow freed from dreams, .../In the picture’s background possibilities grew dim./accidents lacked the necessary shape” (“Memory Finally,” NEF 111). The dream image is recovered and described. We may treat the painter’s canvas as an ennobling of the oneiric vision. Extracted from the great museum of imagination, Rembrandt comes to help us by filling the empty space of expectations:

Memory’s finally found what it was after.  
My mother has turned up, my father has been spotted.  
I dreamed up a table and two chairs. They sat.

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192 M. Baranowska, *Ja – Cień*, in: *Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć... Szyborska i świat*, Wrocław 1996, p. 32. Also cf. J. Brzozowski, “Poetycki sen o dojrzałości. O “Dwóch małpach Bruegla,”” in: *O wierszach Wisławy Szyborskiej. Szkice i interpretacje*, ed. J. Brzozowski, Łódź 1996, p. 20.

193 See A. Dziadek, “Ekfrazja i hypotypoza,” in: *Obrazy i wiersze. Z zagadnień interferencji sztuk w polskiej poezji współczesnej*, Katowice 2004, pp. 53–55.

They were mine again, alive again for me.  
 The two lamps of their faces gleamed at dusk  
 as if for Rembrandt ("Memory Finally," NEF 111).

Light against darkness. The order of culture against the disintegration of time. Rembrandt-like representation means here a sudden flare of consciousness. The faces of parents emanate with light. The reference to chiaroscuro technique determines the wonder brought about by the vision and its disappearing character. The parent figures that emerge from the darkness appear as if coming straight from nothingness. As Rudolf Arnheim argues:

the life-giving energy establishes the center and the range of a narrow world. Nothing exists beyond the corners to which the rays reach.... When the darkness is so deep that it provides a foil of black nothingness, the beholder receives the compelling impression of things emerging from a state of non-being and likely to return to it. Instead of presenting a static world with a constant inventory, the artist shows life as a process of appearing and disappearing.<sup>194</sup>

Struggle against unfaithful memory in "Memory Finally" is rewarded with a sudden flash of a dream image. According to Jacek Łukasiewicz: "The parents, after a purgatory of bizarre and grotesque dreams of their daughter, achieve the heaven of a Rembrandtian portrait."<sup>195</sup> The goal is fidelity and compliance of external truth with an internal feeling. We need no other beauty. The traditional pair of concepts – truth and beauty – becomes one in this miracle of seeing into the past. The parents "shone, beautiful because just like themselves" (NEF 112). Oneiric realism is better than idealization, while a reliable resemblance is better than dazzling metamorphoses. To emphasize the value of the vision even more, Szyborska employs a fairy-tale phrase: "They appeared to me for a long, long, happy time" (NEF 112). Notably, Julian Przyboś regarded "Memory Finally" to be a "masterpiece dream reporting."<sup>196</sup>

We wake up with a regret from such a dream. The transition to the real world "sits on our shoulders" ("The Real World," EB 292); that is, it only remains attached to what is fulfilled, which disappoints us: "I woke up. I opened my eyes./I

194 R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, pp. 325, 327.

Also cf. E. Bieńkowska, "Mądrość światłocienia," *Znak* 4/1977.

195 J. Łukasiewicz, "Miłość, czyli zmysł udziału. O wierszach Wisławy Szyborskiej," in: *Rytm, czyli powinność. Szkice o książkach i ludziach po roku 1980*, Wrocław 1993, p. 163.

196 J. Przyboś, "Poezja Szyborskiej," in: *Radość czytania Szyborskiej. Wybór tekstów krytycznych*, eds. S. Balbus, D. Wojda, Kraków 1996, p. 30.

touched the world, a chiseled picture frame” (“Memory Finally,” NEF 112). The important problem of framing in art stimulates Szymborska’s imagination, because it marks the boundaries between the real and the imagined world. In “Landscape,” the alter-ego of the speaker – the woman in Hobbema’s painting – firmly holds the basket “so as not to slip out of the painting” (NEF 113). Elsewhere, to cross the frame may mean to create the image of a person in the gaze of another. In this sense, an admired woman becomes an artificial artwork. That is, she exists inside a picture. Such reflection is illusory, but always very desirable. In “Over Wine,” when the spell of gaze ceases, the speaker abandons idealization for a skeptical self-analysis:

When he isn’t looking at me,  
I try to catch my reflection  
on the wall. And see the nail  
where a picture used to be (S 81).

It seems as if Boris Uspenskij’s explanation was prepared for this particular fragment of poetry: “the frames of a painting ... by necessity belong to the space of the external beholder ... and not to the supposed three-dimensional space represented in the picture. When we intellectually enter this supposed space, we forget about the frames, just as we forget about the wall, on which the painting hangs.”<sup>197</sup>

Szymborska remembers about the frame and transitions between various realities. The frame is an abyss few centimeters broad, which divides compensatory illusion from the real life (“Landscape”). The touch of the frame means a blackout of Rembrandtian dream (“Memory Finally”). The nail left after a hanging painting may be a visible sign of the possible magic of transformation (“Over Wine”).

What is also interesting are references to art, which do not deconstruct and recompose the artworks. These paintings do not lend their order to experiences and dreams. They become no objects of commentary. On the contrary, this time it is art that comments on the criminal ailments of history. Szymborska treats painting as a pretext, but it does not mean it plays a marginal role. In “Brueghel’s Two Monkeys,” the concise representation of a painting anecdote is closely related to the parabolic presentation of disappointment, own work before

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197 B. Uspieński, “Strukturalna wspólnota różnych rodzajów sztuki (na przykładzie malarstwa i literatury),” transl. Z. Zaron, in: *Semiotyka kultury*, eds. E. Janus, M. R. Mayenowa, Warszawa 1975, p. 224.

1956, an accusation of Stalinism, and a forewarning for the future. Poems from the same volume *Calling Out to Yeti* make this semantic context more precise.<sup>198</sup>

The painting of Peter Bruegel the Elder appears in a dream. It appears in a recurring nightmare of the probably failed exam in the “History of Mankind” (COY 42). The painting becomes part of a great metaphor that includes an abbreviation of history and an uncomfortable psychological situation. Szymborska’s poem interestingly plays with space, because the image with two monkeys in a window – framed with a thick wooden arc – is incorporated into an unspecified room of pedagogical torture. That is where the exam occurs. There appears a monologizing figure in front of the painting-window:

The exam is History of Mankind.

I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,  
the other seems to be dreaming away —  
but when it’s clear I don’t know what to say  
he prompts me with a gentle  
clinking of his chain (“Brueghel’s Two Monkeys,” COY 42).

Silence derives from shame and embarrassment. Anna Legeżyńska argues that the most important element in “Brueghel’s Two Monkeys” is “the concept of reversing roles: it is not the human who looks at nature, but vice versa, nature “tests” his humanity.”<sup>199</sup> The situation undermines the human position as the most perfect creation of nature, because it is impossible to hide the barbarism of the dethroned king of creation. In short, the history of humanity is the history of enslavement with people as tyrants in the world of nature, while history is a senseless bloody spectacle.

“Brueghel’s Two Monkeys” corrects the meaning of Brueghel’s work. The allegory of subjugated Dutch provinces,<sup>200</sup> just like the connection with the moralistic proverb “to go to court because of a hazel nut” (for a petty crime), is irrelevant here, because what matters is the “historiosophical and existential” meaning.<sup>201</sup> A window niche defines the space of monkeys’ torment, while the window opens to a beautiful luminous landscape. The figure in front of the window sees both plans. Szymborska contrasts the sorrow of stillness with movement, the

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198 Brzozowski, “Poetycki sen,” pp. 12–14.

199 A. Legeżyńska, *Wislawa Szymborska*, Poznań 1996, p. 22.

200 J. Francis, *Bruegel przeciwko władzy*, transl. E. Radziwiłłowa, Warszawa 1976, p. 57.

201 Dziadek, “Ekfrazja i hypotypoza,” pp. 141–142.

narrowness of the closed space with an open perspective, the enslavement with the desire for freedom.

The case of the poem “Wrong Number” is still different. This work is about the paradox of perfect art and imperfect life. Again, we find here a few examples from the catalog of a museum exhibition but selected to foreground frozen motion. Szyborska contrasts the stillness of the figures in the paintings to the mobility of the living people, absorbed in everyday bustle. In contrast to the mundane employment, the “eyes [of prophets and kings are] fixed on some nail” (“Wrong Number,” CH 157). The latter will remain unmoved and, of course, will not respond to the invitation to talk. On the one side of the gilded frames, there will be “nonaction,” while on the other side, a simple mistake in the choice of phone number. The display of art’s artificiality is comical and instructive. Immobilized in their poses, the haughtily silent witnesses will not overcome the misunderstanding, as they will remain only the background for the human comedy. Szyborska views the reason for human existence in our right to imperfection. She argues her idea with the transformation of the famous proud formula of Descartes: “He lives, so he errs” (“Wrong Number,” CH 157).

Painters use lines and colors that engage the human eye to develop life situations. Szyborska’s poetry visualizes reflections and impressions to give concrete shape to ideas. Painting domesticates new areas of experience. Paintings overcome foreignness, define nonincarnate things, and stop chaos. A sudden association to an artwork appears suddenly and, without unnecessary translations, it stimulates the recipient’s cultural memory. When in “The Suicide’s Room” appears a detail – “Saskia and her cordial little flower” (LN 225) – this visual appeal will not encounter emptiness. An educated reader will think about Rembrandt’s painting “Flora” or “Saskia as Flora.” Another sentence inserted in the argument about the family album – “No Bosch-like hell within their souls” (“Family Album,” NEF 115) – eliminates a certain type of association only if we know what the reference point is. That is, there were no scandals, excesses, or misdeeds in the family. Bosch’s satanic hybrids and demonological symbolism provides here a form for erroneous guesses. In other words, Szyborska’s righteous bourgeois protagonists resist phantasms of vice like Bosch’s Saint Anthony. Noteworthy, Saint Anthony’s temptations overturned the nice rules of the world, whereas our demons of sensation and scandal – especially in mass culture – are much smaller temptations that, nevertheless, poison the imagination.

For Szyborska, painting and sculpture refer to the psychological reality. Once one notices the comparison, the reference to an artwork beings to reveal psychology’s deficiencies and defects. Szyborska’s travel poems elaborate the matter of the scattering of images in memory. After visiting world galleries,



museums, and famous sites,<sup>202</sup> there only remains a ruin of impressions, as in “Travel Elegy,” we read: “Memories come to mind like excavated statues/that have misplaced their heads” (S 70). The mutilated ancient sculptures partly imitate the action of memory. Because memory operates like a guillotine. Artworks appear in their finite shape only in the present moment. The current reception provides the complete experience. When traces of fresh and delighted observation disappear, there begins the process of dissipation. We can no longer recover the initial whole.

Szyborska’s poetry repeats no schemes. It may happen that representations of art bring to life an everyday street image. The Gothic fantasies by Viollette-Duc and famous sculptures from the Paris cathedral of Notre-Dame observe the sleeping vagabond (“Clochard”). The clochard appears as the successor of the medieval people of the road. He incarnates the eternal pattern. Posing for paintings is also his domain: “And they never paid him in the fifteenth century/ for posing as the thief on Christ’s left hand –/he has forgotten all about it, he’s not waiting” (“Clochard,” S 67).

The language of art supports the apology and phenomenology of dreams (“In Praise of Dreams”), helps to understand duration and transience, and illuminates the relationship between people and things (“Museum”). The language of art enters Szyborska’s anthropological reflection (“The Monkey,” “A Paleolithic Fertility Fetish,” “Cave”) and allows us to look into the nature’s masterful order (“Thomas Mann,” “Returning Birds,” and “Commemoration”). Nature naturally exceeds the measure of diverse perfection that is available to us, so we may only describe its creations with the help of the best human creations. Szyborska juxtaposes the two orders by using comparisons of natural and man-made things: painting, architecture, and the applied arts.<sup>203</sup>

Szyborska’s poetry corrects the shape and meaning of ontologically different realities in two directions: the artistic imagination enriches the experience of the surrounding world, while the unlimited number of perfect forms of existence in nature reveals the limited set of truths offered by art. The principle of exclusivity gives way to interpenetration of art and life. In their common field, where the indicated components of the poetic world intersect, occurs a meeting of art and life in accordance to the patterns of painting or sculpture. Reflection types can exchange places. Immature life feeds on the wisdom of culture and, on the other

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202 For more about factographies of travel, see Bikont, *Szczęсна, Pamiętkowe rupiecie*, pp. 109–119.

203 For more, see Grądział, “Świat sztuki,” pp. 86–87.

hand, the unpredictability of coincidence questions the ready-made patterns and poses. Cognitive subversion requires us to read artworks against the prevailing customs of reception. Finally, ready-made judgments provoke us to intellectual quarrels.

Additional commentaries shift the center of gravity from the reconstruction of artworks in poetic language to current matters along with historical, social, and psychological issues. The thematic breakthrough has its counterpart in the style of Szymborska's poems: from a fidelity to the atmosphere of the times to the foregrounding of foreign elements from outside of the circle of poetic imitations. On the other hand, the exposition of the foundation of the painting's existence (canvases, frames) – along with descriptions of painting techniques and the analysis of purely pictorial values – informs us that the lyrical action happens in an artificially isolated world. Szymborska's irony achieves its full range here. Change is the dominant feature of Szymborska's poetic world: life in art serves the art of life.

## V Dialog with Texts of Culture

### The Gallery of Ancestors: Literary Strolls

The encounter of Wisława Szymborska's poetic quest with certain painting styles does not exhaust the theme of poetic revision. The language of art and the existing world order fall under the law of revision. In these poems, symbolic space overlaps with physical space. We enter the world created by art to quickly recognize that it bears characteristics of everyday reality. The poet operates with a multitude of perspectives, making things, as well as their reflections in texts of culture, constantly shift between artistic fabrication and the spontaneous truth of life.

In this chapter, we shall discuss the correspondence between Szymborska's poetry and the arts – literature, theater, film, music, various nonartistic and documentary forms, and phenomena of mass culture. Let us supplement this list with philosophical writing. Here, the highest realms of thought and artistic mastery face their counterpoint in popular art – especially kitsch and circus prestidigitation, which the poet admired. In Szymborska's poetry, all these cultural manifestations converge.

The recognition of culture as a friendly area, a place of great spirits' communion, plays an important role in Szymborska's work. Although the poet does not create erudite rebuses, her poems contain a wide range of literary references and quotations: from the Bible, Homer's world, Plato's dialogs, ancient tragedies, through the most respected, even cherished Montaigne and the greatest authors, like Dante, Shakespeare, and Thomas Mann, to Polish poets: Adam Mickiewicz,<sup>204</sup> Cyprian Norwid, and Bolesław Leśmian. Of course, there are also some playful quotations and paraphrases. For instance, in a series of various names, data, and inscriptions we suddenly encounter Mickiewicz's *epea pteroenta*, "słowiczku mój a leć a piej," in translation transformed into Shelley's "bird thou never wert" ("Pi," LN 233). When expressing astonishment at the cruelty of nature that kills its perfect creations, Szymborska paraphrases Ignacy Krasicki: "Rejoice, O reason: instinct can err, too" ("Returning Birds," NEF 139). And when viewing a map and considering the question of the downsized world,

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204 See J. Brzozowski, "W stronę Lozanny. Wisławy Szymborskiej czytanie Mickiewicza," *Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. A. Mickiewicza*, XXXI/1996, Warszawa 1997.

she uses the phrase from “A Parable of the Poppy by Czesław Miłosz:” “in every black pinprick/people keep on living” (Map, E 432).

This dialogue with predecessors enriches the poetic statement: it helps the poet support her own truth and crystallize her attitude. Timeless conversation with the past becomes a kind of school of thought. In her Nobel speech, Szymborska praises the concept of eternal novelty against the alleged exhaustion of literature: ““There’s nothing new under the sun”: that’s what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun.”<sup>205</sup>

Writers and readers belong to a great whole of created beings. Szymborska often views them in this cosmic perspective. Great artistic personalities appear as a great mystery, or even an exception in the development of the human species. There is also a negative version: Szymborska asks whether people would recognize the immensity of their loss if there were Shakespeare or Montaigne. Her review of Mongaigne’s *Essays* (published in *Nonrequired Reading*) suggests we should read this work “with astonishment” (NR 219) that such an unusual author and thinker has been woven into “the dense fabric of history” (NR 223). The tendency toward reflective wondering comes from Montaigne. Let us quote Szymborska’s symptomatic remark: “For me, [Montaigne] is one of the greatest writers in the world.... He wondered about everything. In fact, he taught me to wonder at the world and its diversity.”<sup>206</sup> In Szymborska’s hierarchy, Montaigne always comes first. Here is a humorous passage from her *Poczta literacka* (Literary Post): “When pronounce the name Montaigne, we should stress the last syllable and bend one knee” (PL 104).

According to Szymborska, *Essays* are to this day an amazing self-portrait of a thinking man (WLN 661). Michel de Montaigne, like the great legislator of poetic humor and the “comedy of evolution,”<sup>207</sup> Thomas Mann, become subject to anthropological reflection. The existence of these writers is the most

205 W. Szymborska, “Nobel Lecture,” <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1996/szymborska/lecture/> (15.02.2019).

206 “Lekcja zdziwienia światem. Pierwszy wywiad telewizyjny z Wisławą Szymborską przeprowadzony przez Teresę Walas w dniu przyznania Poetce Nagrody Nobla,” in: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej. Wybór tekstów krytycznych*, ed. S. Balbus i D. Wojda, Kraków 1996, p. 22.

207 See A. Gronczewski, “Rzeczy Tomasza Manna – poeta jako czytelnik (II),” in: *Obiad na ruinach. Eseje*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 150–152.

important event in natural history. Szymborska extracts evidence for of bizarre efforts of matter, which culminated in the works of culture. Unusual abilities in the field of spirit distinguish man as a species – they are both dignifying and committing for the whole humankind. That is why Szymborska gives up capital letters and provocatively subsumes the names of great men under the category of common names. As in the words of the prehistoric mother: “My first sacred bellies/filled with minuscule Pascals” (“Cave,” NEF 147). In turn, in the balance of our achievements on a planetary scale, we read about the “mozarts,/platos, edisons out there” (“The Ball,” M 347).

In *Nonrequired Reading*, Szymborska’s return to the canon of world and Polish literature is significant. It is difficult to imagine discourse about human matters without this kind of literary references. In *Nonrequired Reading*, the reader will find insightful (usually brief) notes about Horace, Petronius, Pepys, Goethe, Leo Tolstoy, Laforgue, Czechowicz, and others. In creating portraits of writers, Szymborska often employs biographical narratives and quotations from diaries. Sometimes she associates a writer or philosopher with a general attitude, a particular way of understanding the world, or a certain lifestyle. If Montaigne epitomizes a wise man, Marcus Aurelius justifies skepticism and a mature understanding of human affairs (“The Old Professor”) and Alan Alexander Milne champions the vulnerable tenderness and naive wisdom located in a reality without history (“Hand”).

For Szymborska, the realm of reading is a safe territory, which she willingly visits. Studying life through reading and the experience of reading in life gain crucial importance in this poetry. The poet observes with anxiety the coming of an age of nonreading. Rejecting reading in favor of easier media such as television or the Internet is another great failure of our “post-humanistic” times. Soon people will forget what literature is and how they can benefit from contact with artistic works. The poem “Nonreading” presents a seemingly funny series of misunderstandings between the multi-volume masterpiece of Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, and the mentality shaped by television and mass travel. Shallow and foolish conversations, typical of everyday life, are contrasted with the sagacious thought and artistic novel of this great outsider; quick changes of impressions with the need for concentration; self-indulgence with deep and searching reflection; slides viewed without focus with spiritual capital produced by memories. Prust’s masterpiece is in conflict with the culture of rapid information flow and the entertainment of flickering images:

Seven volumes – mercy.  
 Couldn’t it be cut or summarized,  
 Or better yet put into pictures (“Nonreading,” H 405).

The decline of cultural competences took place so quickly that the outstanding literary work – as an array of complex meanings – can no longer be read. The poet ironically shows the situations in which Homo novus perceives literature as distant, exotic, eccentric, or even – in the case of Proust – seek. In turn, the rejection of the so-called higher needs is considered to be a symptom of vigor and vitality. Perhaps, for didactic purposes, the poet creates a caricature, but this one-sided picture does not deviate much from detached psychological and sociological observation. Szyborska's gloomy prophecy is now being fulfilled.

While the poem "Nonreading" gives voice to figures with whom the author would never identify, the poem "In a Mail Coach" (published in the same volume *Here*) reveals her spiritual affinities with the world of the romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki. The piece dialogs with *The Letters of Juliusz Słowacki to His Mother*. Significantly, by the accumulation of bodily and material details, Szyborska negates the romantic concept of journey.

There are many more portraits in this gallery of ancestors. Books, paintings, and musical pieces are in a way the natural environment for the figures of Wisława Szyborska's poetry. The irreducible presence of cultural heritage does not have to be emphasized. In addition to various references to the canon of high literature and the most outstanding paintings, the textual sphere in Szyborska's poetry includes biblical stories ("Synopsis," "Lot's Wife"), Greek mythology ("On the Banks of the Styx," "Census," "A Moment in Troy," "Soliloquy for Cassandra"), historiographic sources ("Lesson," "Voices," "Beheading," "A Tale Begun"), dialogue with biographical accounts ("Certainty," "The Great Man's House," "The Classic," "Autotomy," "In Broad Daylight," "In a Mail Coach"). But she never disregards the circulation of nonartistic documents: popular movies, television, photography, and letters.

A common property of all these poems is the position of the speaking "I" that oscillates between penetrating into the reality of cultural artifacts and going beyond their limits. In the latter case, the poet manifests a critical position by developing new readings which do not conform to the pattern of reception determined by discussed works. Szyborska's intertextualism is rather moderate: significant quotes and references are often hidden in her texts. In fact, the two major characteristics of her poetics – literariness and colloquiality – complement each other perfectly.

## Music and Circumstances

Critics and researches rarely pay attention to references to music in Szyborska's poetry and *Nonrequired Reading*, even though several works belonging to this

group have been extensively discussed. These include “Coloratura” and “Aging Opera Singer.”<sup>208</sup> However, one ought to emphasize that – like in the case of the poet’s interest in painting – the art of sound as a subject of description is concerns a multiplicity of areas and meanings. Music appears in Szymborska’s reflection on the perfection of works and imperfections of artists, musical harmony and disharmonious human relations with the world, the lasting and passing of time, the beautiful nature of sound and nonbeautiful body, and finally – aesthetic delight (therapy and consolation) and life full of suffering.

We should start with musical metaphors. Szymborska often mentions music when considering other problems, and she helps the reader understand various phenomena by using musical terminology. After all, not only sight but also hearing of musical and extra-musical sounds is engaged in the study of the multiplicity of things. Like Zbigniew Herbert, Szymborska translates the qualities of painting and architecture into the language of music. This strategy makes it possible to express the inexpressible, at least to a certain extent, and strengthen admiration. Let us give several examples: the essence of Vermeer’s painting is best expressed by “a quartet consisting of two violins, bassoon, and harp” (NR 41). In turn, the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris was not built, but “played upon a lute” (S 67), while the large collection of sculptures of Violet-le-Duca appears as “Gothic *allegro vivace*” (“Clochard,” S 67).

Another description of the musical tempo, “fast but not too much,” refers to the prudent handling of the gift of life, the contemplation of the ingenuity of nature, and the praise of beauty (“*Allegro ma Non Troppo*”). Scoffers and cosmic jokers cannot care less about Pythagorean perfection, because they do not want to get rid of defective human nature. They “Don’t take jesters into outer space” (“Warning,” LN 221) – as the ironic valuation of musical genres goes. As we remember, Szymborska’s poetic definition of onion is: “A centripetal fugue./ Polyphony compressed” (“The Onion,” LN 223). Her polyphonic, contrapuntal, elaborate treatise about forms of nature and human existence incorporates the virtuoso metaphor.<sup>209</sup>

Death as a calm, rhythmic plunging in silence, deprived of fear and pain, goes into the area of the second edition of the world, which is almost perfect:

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208 M. Głowiński, “Wisławy Szymborskiej ‘Stary śpiewak’”, *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 2014, no. 1, pp. 73–78.

209 See A. Węgrzyniakowa, “Barokowa fuga na temat różnicy bytów”, in: *O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej*, pp. 80–93. A. Hejmej discusses the semantics of the word “fugue” in poetry. See his *Muzyczność dzieła literackiego*, Wrocław 2001, pp. 119–123.

When it comes, you'll be dreaming  
 that you don't need to breathe;  
 that breathless silence is  
 the music of the dark  
 and it's part of the rhythm  
 to vanish like a spark ("I'm Working on the World," COY 56).

Why did a man kill himself if he lived in the best company of records and books? It is impossible to answer this question. There is no use in the "comforting trumpet poised in black hands" or "Joy the spark of gods" ("The Suicide's Room," LN 225). Luis Amstrong will not play for those who killed themselves, there will be no chorus from Beethoven's 9th Symphony to sing Schiller's famous ode.

Music emerges as a realm of music lover's joy – but also of philosophical consolation. Beyond beautiful and rational sound configurations, the world is unpredictable. People have to deal with dangerous fantasies of history and scourges of existence, and to accept suffering – "Bach's fugue, played/for the time being/on a saw" ("I'm Working on the World," COY 55) – that is how the poet describes our pathetic attempts and aspirations. The circus musical piece becomes an insightful description of the paradoxical imperfect mastery and the tawdry apogee of artistry. We listen to music in somewhat inappropriate conditions, isolated from the pain of the world. What resonates against the backdrop of cheerful compositions are the voices of the unhappy. Perhaps, it is the depth of human anxiety that produces eschatological dissonances. There is nothing we can do about it. As the voice in "Under One Small Star" makes clear: "I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths" (CH 192).

However, releasing the joy of listening acquires a deeper meaning in Szyborska's poetry. The artistic idea of opposing the macrocosm of the mind and the microcosm of tears is both interesting and unusual. The crying person does not know that there is a party in her tears, chemical elements are dancing and the revelers – oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen – are playing around ("Motion"). In this "very serious"<sup>210</sup> joke, regret escapes words. We are hearing the best music, Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. The playfulness of words, rhythms, and images appears fine-tuned with the ball's theme. Szyborska's "Motion" presents – and, indeed, is – dance.

In Szyborska's poetry, private confessions are quite exceptional. It is merely in passing, and rather indirectly, that we learn about her musical tastes. Let us

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210 J. Jarzębski, "Po jednej stronie gardło, śmiech po drugiej. Bariery ontologiczne w poezji Szyborskiej," in: *Gry poetyckie i teatralne*, Kraków 2018, p. 227.



quote a passage from *Nonrequired Reading*, where Szymborska is more explicit and emphasizes the therapeutic magic of Ella Fitzgerald's music: "Her voice reconciles me to life, it cheers me. I can't say the same for any other singer" ("Ella," NR 276). The singer used gentle expressive means, which the poet valued highly. These remarks correspond to the late poem "Ella in Heaven" (from the volume *Here*), in which Ella Fitzgerald's misfortunes find consolation in the God's recognition of her talent. References to swing and improvised music, let us recall, appear already in Szymborska's earliest, debut poems, e.g. "Black Song."<sup>211</sup> Still, music with vividly pulsating syncopes cannot overcome sadness ensuing from the disaster of war. Neither can it stop a self-destructive drive in an individual, as the poem "The Suicide's Room" shows.

This reveals a wide scope of Szymborska's musical interests – ranging from entertainment to classical music. We should not that, in many texts from *Nonrequired Reading*, Szymborska delightfully comments on books about music, including an album with Georg Händel's biography and iconography, Frédéric Chopin's correspondence, memories of Arthur Rubinstein, Fedor Chaliapin or Beniamino Gigli, Louis Armstrong's autobiographical writings, Pablo Casals' conversations, and the Hill brothers' work on Antonio Stradivari. In these enchanting essays, the author's curiosity turns in many different directions. Szymborska is interested in music and related issues, such as biographies of great artists, including the everyday life, myths, and social images of composers, the spiritual format of musicians, opera's conventions, listening habits, the history of musical instruments, and therapies through the art of sound.

The poet's "flashing," often aphoristic remarks testify to the power and originality of reflection unfolded in *Nonrequired Reading*. It would be tempting to quote many different passages; however, we should restrict our discussion to a small selection. For instance, Szymborska gives a remarkable comment on Beniamino Gigli's memoirs and his long outstanding career: "Wars revolutions, fascisms, crises are only moving decorations ... while he stands at the front of the stage observing his diaphragm" (WLN 328). In turn, that is how she describes Pablo Casals' moral virtues: "words like freedom, human dignity and character sound the same in his mouth. Surprisingly, they sound as pure as the sound of his cello" (WLN 207).

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211 See J. Wiśniewski, "Wisława Szymborska o muzykach i muzyce," in: *Ku harmonii? Poetyckie style słuchania muzyki w wierszach polskich autorów po 1945 roku*, Łódź 2013, p. 175–178.

Apart from jazz, opera is another important theme addressed in *Nonrequired Reading*. In her discussion of Józef Kański's, Szyborska employs anthropological categories with a subtle humor. Especially remarkable is the idea of juxtaposing librettos with taboos: "A strict personal politics prevails in the world of opera. Family relationships are prescribed by codes as inviolable as those governing primitive tribes. A soprano must be a bass's daughter, a baritone's wife, and a tenor's lover. A tenor may neither generate an alto nor copulate with a contralto." (NR 33). In the same text, exhibiting the same mastery of humor, Szyborska mocks complex plots and vague intrigues typical of many librettos.

In terms of reception, the paradox of opera is that the viewer-listener should do his or her best to respect the conventionality of the performance, to recognize that the actions on stage are subordinated to musical values. Typically, Szyborska prefers heresy, i.e. reception which runs afoul of established schemes. Thus, the poet continues to explore the border between the heavenly realm of musical perfection and its realization through an earthly, body engaging performance. This confrontation, to be sure, triggers a comic side effect. But would it hurt to discover an inherent ridiculousness at the very heart of seriousness?

We can use *Nonrequired Reading* as an explanatory context for interpretation of Szyborska's poems. The excellent poem "Coloratura" reveals the gap between the enchanting speech of sounds and the limitations of the body – the instrument which performs the piece. Of course, the poem relies on the forces of pastiche and parody. More importantly, however, "Coloratura" is a successful attempt at imitating the sound of an aria, which makes it both a story about musical language and a presentation of that language. For Szyborska's heroine...

Oh yes, she Cares (with a high C)  
for Fellow Humans (you and me);  
for us she'll twitter nothing bitter;  
she'll knit her fitter, sweeter glitter;  
her vocal chords mince words for us  
and crumble croutons, with crisp crunch  
(lunch for her little lambs to munch)  
into a cream-filled demitasse (S 84).

The musical ornamentation of coloratura manifests itself through images. The euphonic qualities of language are interwoven with linguistic humor. The artist performs a piece with as "thin" a texture as a hair (*włos*), with an extremely delicate and intricate design, singing in Italian (*włoskim*). The singer herself is the epitome of grace and appears as a unique work of art, a lavish filigree. When singing, she is no longer a real existing person.

The stage on which the action of the opera performance takes place is a model example of the artificial world. The poet reinforced this impression by referring to women's taste for the rococo ("twig-wigged tree," "demitasse" – an association with porcelain figurines) and to galant musical style with all its lightness, grace, and finesse, which corresponds to this taste. From the very beginning, the reader is aware of the idea of translating music into poetic phrases. A too hasty interpretation would suggest that "Coloratura" is about singing technique and musical style, which find their perfect equivalent in poetic language.

The performed aria is fulfilled in the sound of words, which produces absurd combinations of events, while performing difficulties multiply the number of vicissitudes. In some conceivable parody of an Italian aria (let us remind that in the 1950s the poet was editing the libretto for the Polish Music Publishing House), there appears a ridiculous arrangement of masculine rhymes, and the parallelism of syntax underline the affective intensity of the heroine's experiences. Szyborska's poetic story describes an aria performance and is an aria itself – a parody of a nonexistent translation from Italian. A literary and musical play of the highest standing takes place on many levels of the text.

Coloratura refers to an elaborate melody, "colored" with passages, trills, runs, and wide leaps. It requires precision to keep in the rhythm of staccato intervals. In Szyborska's poem, the coloratura-like ornamentation, based on one repeated syllable, crowns these complicated operations. To achieve an effect of multiplied sound, the poet turns to an image, which belongs to the field of optics: "she'll knit her fitter, sweeter glitter" (S 84). There is an obvious link between the multiplied and fragmented sounds and the technique of *bel canto*.

The world of separate representations of the opera scene and the performance of the *aria di coloratura* do not communicate with anything that does not concern to the art of voice instruction. The fantastic plot refers to the performance of a musical text by the singer. As we have already noted, the lyrical action follows the path of sound associations. The initial bright tone characteristic of the freedom of singing is threatened by a dark tone, which means the artist's vocal indisposition. A conspiracy of musical instruments seems to have been plotted, the prophecy of the end of the singer's career is almost fulfilled. Szyborska juxtaposes the solfège with the Baltazar feast: "Basso Profondo, end this terror,/do-re-mi mene tekel et cetera!" ("Coloratura," S 84). In this poem, which employs a specific musical monism in the buffo tone, the hell opens in the bass clef. In this poem, in which the poet in the tone of the buffo uses a kind of musical monism, the hell opens with a bass key. "Basso profondo" ("deep" bass) belongs to the worst officers of hell. Perhaps, to Beelzebub himself.

And yet the artist comes out victorious from the fierce duel with her difficult vocal part: “her vox humana crystal-clears/the whole world up. And we’re all ears.” (S 85). In a similar poem by Stanisław Barańczak’s, titled *Tenorzy* (The Tenors), the voice in a not-so-charming bodily shell bears testimony to the transgression of human limits and retaliation against an unfavorable fate. Szyborska’s singer is in love with her own singing. However, this praise of artistry has a different side, too – there is a danger of reducing the human being to an effective singing machine. For pure art is inhuman: it speaks only of its own harmony and leaves no room for ordinary life. Culture often dismisses the bodily realm and the singer ought to renounce the body. What is most human, namely the body, should be subordinated to art. However, according to the poet, the wonderfully performed (and realized in language) aria can only achieve humanistic fulness when the artist bears in mind his or her own limitations and remains aware of the possibility of failure.

A wise, thought-provoking poetic joke (“Coloratura”) provides an interpretative context for the poem “The Classic” (from the volume *Could Have*). In this piece, the melancholic joke is combined with ironic sadness if not elegiac sorrow. The songs preserved for posterity prompt us to forget about the man, and the classical work, according to its etymology, is a perfect work. The separation of the eternal art from the mortal author has a paradoxical form of reduction to perfection:

A few clods of dirt, and his life will be forgotten.  
The music will break free from circumstance....  
Everything that’s not a quintet  
will become a superfluous sixth.  
Everything that’s not a choir made of forty angels  
will fall silent, reduced to barking dogs, a gendarme’s belch (“The Classic,”  
CH 186).

Music eliminates nonmusical conditions. It does not tolerate intruders in the arrangement of forms. That is why episodes of defamed and tainted life will always “sound” dissonant. For the music of angels did not emerge in heavenly conditions, and its author was not a pure spirit. Reduction to perfection eliminates these crude and trivial sounds that hurt a delicate ear. We cannot allow the ordinary or vulgar element to invade the territory of perfection. As the poet reminds us, Romanticism had not arrived yet. Musical subjectivism was still unknown. The classic is not focused on expressing moods, illustrating our struggle with fate or telling the story about himself in the language of sound. Aesthetic listeners, in turn, set aside the author’s pain and loneliness, the envy which surrounds him,

the unfriendly public, his hard, often backbreaking work, financial problems, and other hardships of life.

Wisława Szymborska devised a poetic policy of reclamation.<sup>212</sup> It restores what we do not want to remember, makes the recipient aware of the anguish of creation. Therefore, it does not aim to hide human misery, which underlies success and (usually posthumous) fame. In Szymborska, death appears as an ironist. Let us quote a passage about the fate of a composer's earthly goods: "The shoes, inconvenient witnesses, will be tossed on the trash heap./The least gifted of his pupils will get the violin..../His poor mother's letters will line the stomachs of mice." ("The Classic," CH 186). The biography will also be censored ("The ill-fated love will fade away," CH 186). This is how the irony of private history finds its fulfillment.

In "The Classic," the moving scene of cleaning up after the deceased is also a scene of transformation: the master is prepared to embrace eternal life in art, where, liberated from corporeal existence, he will speak only through his works. This brings to mind "The Master" by Czesław Miłosz (a poem about elevation through art and the idleness of material life) and Zbigniew Herbert's "Beethoven" (about disease, deafness, and masterpieces) or his poetic prose "Dom poety" (The Poet's House;<sup>213</sup> about luring out an artistic presence, correcting one's image, and a sterile museum).

Perfection and death are one and the same thing. Szymborska's "The Classic" expresses rebellion against mythologization and mystification, which present mortal life as a disgrace to immortal art. The poet, in turn, attentively describes the problematic inventory of things bequeathed by the artist, knowing that music will still find delight in music. That is why, in her poetry, quartets and cataplasm, or quintets and a dusty wig can reside together in a strange harmony. Contrary to the widespread image of the classic, Szymborska's composer is not reduced to absolute pitch and a hand writing brilliant sheet music. Her compassionate description of the artist highlights the misery of existence. Because of a striking disproportion between artistic achievements and the vanity of life, two orders emerge: the earthly household and the realm of artistic immortality. After the annihilation of objects, pure music remains. At this moment, as the poet ironically assumes, nothing would interrupt the creation of the aesthetic paradise.

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212 See. E. Balcerzan, *W szkole świat*. "O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej", in: *Śmiech pokoleń – płacz pokoleń*, Kraków 1997, pp. 105–106; 109.

213 See Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems 1956–1958*, transl. A. Valles, London 2009.

After the death of the master (the protagonist of Szymborska's poem is someone like Mozart) and the disposal of his earthly belongings, what remains is his eternal music:

Now hark! ye mortals, listen, listen now,  
take heed, in rapt amazement,  
O rapt, O stunned, O heedful mortals, listen,  
O listeners – now listen – be all ears – (“The Classic,” CH 186)

Aesthetic ecstasy makes people forget about their trivial concerns and painful fate. Like in Bergman's movie, *The Magic Flute*, the audience is engrossed in Mozart's operatic masterpiece. The camera stops at some focused faces ablaze with pleasure of musical experience. The listeners surrender themselves to the magic of music. Their existence boils down to the reception of sounds. They do not want to go back to a normal life. Do they think about the imperfect circumstances, in which the song was created? This seems rather doubtful. Apparently, mortals want to communicate with other mortals using the signs of art, which escape the limitations of time.

## VI The Dream of a Better World

### Utopia and Anxiety

Szyborska views reality captured in poetry and other artistic description as incomplete, incoherent, and open. The creative act conveys the awareness of limitations: writing is an incessant loss of other possibilities, a reduction of many dimensions of existence, an illusory ordering of things, and domain of uncertain knowledge. “A little poem, a sigh, at the cost of indescribable losses” (“A Large Number,” LN 197). Szyborska’s poetic world is in statu nascendi and broadening its borders, but most of its phenomena appears too large for this creative space, despite many attempts. None of the poetic testimonies sufficiently conveys the diversity of viewpoints. In turn, the real world remains irrevocably alien to the cognizing, experiencing, and thinking person, if we are to forego subjective interference, naming, and ordering. As Anna Kamińska writes: “Szyborska’s poetry seems to gather all the “regardless,” to endlessly collect and confront all appearances and viewpoints.”<sup>214</sup>

Therefore, we cannot clearly categorize or classify the ways of existence of things in Szyborska’s poetry. Her poems show a world as subject’s immediately lived surroundings and incarnation of diverse shapes of time<sup>215</sup> that defines the eras of evolution, the history of the human species, the millennia and years of history. More, the wondrously alien, integral, and unfamiliar world of nature, the world of dreams, the intentional reality of art, and the world of language are beings on the side of nonexistence, the conditional mood reality, the objects ontologically limited to the record, the world of memory. They are projections of the lived past, the world of imagination, phantasmagorias as the worlds of erroneous speculation.<sup>216</sup> We may justifiably worry that the ongoing supplementation of classification will leave it incomplete. Let us add to this list “the possible,” “the lost,” “the separated,” and “the rejected worlds,” not to mention those partially or nearly completely forgotten, or those difficult to reconstruct and

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214 A. Kamińska, “Heroizm racjonalizmu,” in: *Od Leśmiana. Najpiękniejsze wiersze polskie*, Warszawa 1974, p. 252.

215 For more about time in Szyborska’s poetry, see J. Śpiewak, *Pracowite zdziwienia. Szkice poetyckie*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 420–421.

216 Cf. J. Kwiatkowski, “Świat wśród nie-światów,” in: *Remont pegazów. Szkice i felietony*, Warszawa 1969, pp. 99–101.

impenetrable.”<sup>217</sup> There are many relationships between these worlds: exclusions and inclusions, substitutions and contrastings, or mutual modifications. The ontological boundaries are unclear. In short, what is the opposing order in Szyborska’s poems for many types of created realities is the tactile empiria, but it also guards its secrets and escapes even a slight appropriation such as naming (“View with a Grain of Sand,” “The Silence of Plants,” “Microcosmos”).

In Szyborska’s poetry, invented worlds are confronted with the world “as it is.” We should separately consider her lyrics that inform about writing, creating new realities, creative abilities, and demiurgical explanations. We may also view these works as attempts to formulate a program, far from the thought of artistic normativism or connections with any literary doctrine. Scattered in Szyborska’s poems and *Nonrequired Reading* are remarks about art that define her own creative method indirectly and through a dispute and dialog with the artistic solutions of other poets.<sup>218</sup> We will not find here any authoritative judgments or attempts to create a poetic system; at the most additions, glosses, refinements.

The title “I’m Working on the World” seems to announce that we will read about autonomous laws of poetic creation. This is a literary credo that refers to the role of the poet and sets out her creative tasks. In “The Joy of Writing,” Szyborska relativizes this problem in the face of the existing world by juxtaposing artistic creative gesture with the transience of human life. Finally, “Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem” offers a self-commentary from the viewpoint of critical stereotypes of reception. Such poems as “An Idea” or “In Fact Every Poem” speak of poetic workshop, creative impulses, and the conditions for the creation of a poem. Whereas “Poetry Reading,” “Stage Fright,” and “Some People Like Poetry” ponder on the impact and functioning of poetry in the social space. The speaker of these poems treats readers like someone close, with attention, kindness, and friendship. This does not mean that the speaker requires little from the reader. In Szyborska’s poetry salon occur conversations at the highest level that consider sensitive and unpleasant themes. The variability of tones and shifts from jokes to seriousness does not exclude the most important matters, about which the reader should be informed with all openness. School

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217 S. Balbus, “Światy możliwe,” in: *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata. O Wisławie Szyborskiej*, Kraków 1996, p. 129. Also see A. van Nieukerken, “Wisława Szyborska i cudowność odczarowanego świata,” in: *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, Kraków 1998, p. 381–382.

218 For more, see J. Grądział, “Świat w pułapce wiersza,” in: *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Wokół Szyborskiej*, Poznań 1996, pp. 72–75.



readers of poetry form the most numerous group, as schools obligate to read poetry, while those truly interested make only a handful. The deconstruction of the title “Some People Like Poetry” – which the speaker performs in this poem by decomposing the initial thesis – reveals that the numbers of poetry lovers systematically dwindle, even quicker than we may think. Our consciousness loses an illusion, but we may subversively derive strength and comfort from a precise calculation. Moreover, Szyborska’s often intimate dialog intensifies the bond and affects the quality of messages between the speaker and readers.

The sense of reality, skepticism, and ironic distance disallow making poetry into a sacred rite. The artistic word does not speak with a cipher to the initiated few. Szyborska’s poetry consequently dismantles and ridicules the poses, pretentious moods, and aura of poets that they produce around the mystery of reading poems.<sup>219</sup> Szyborska’s weapon is grotesque (“Poetry Reading”) or factual transparency about the everyday circumstances of writing and reading, maybe only with a slight exaggeration of everyday trivia (“Stage Fright”). The territory of poetry shrinks, while the area of mass culture expands. The old diagnosis from “Poetry Reading” finds confirmation. Mount Helicon loses its importance and Pegasus can barely fly. The poet may only voice an apostrophe to the helpless muse, a sigh to the lost raptures:

Oh, not to be a boxer but a poet,  
 one sentenced to hard shelleying for life,  
 for lack of muscles forced to show the world  
 the sonnet that may make the highschool reading lists  
 with luck. O Muse,  
 O bobtailed angel, Pegasus (“Poetry Reading,” S 87).

For Szyborska, the writer is not a literary institution but a private person. A lonely person who looks for some real conversation, partly ridiculous in this overwhelming need to fill the pages with signs (“Epitaph,” “In Praise of My Sister”). The need that no one can justify, although many spilled a sea of ink to do just that. Szyborska specifies the matter with cautious and self-irony: “I prefer the absurdity of writing poems/to the absurdity of writing poems” (“Possibilities,” PB 272).

Self-irony and playful attitude are not conducive to the creation of poetic manifestos. Such announcements of a better world in poetry inseparably guide one to the unmasking of literary illusion. Two poems in this regard occupy a special place in Szyborska’s work. “I’m Working on the World” marks the beginning

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219 Cf. Grądziel, “Świat w pułapce wiersza,” pp. 91–92.

of a reflection about starting own artistic path anew. In contrast, “The Joy of Writing” is an important voice in contemporary Polish poetry about creative poetics and the creation of worlds with words. The latter poem finds a complement in “In Fact Every Poem” from the volume *Colon*.

In the first chapter, I have already considered the political dimension of Szymborska’s proper debut, the volume *Calling Out to Yeti*. Here, let us omit these matters only to repeat that the experiences of Stalinism developed Szymborska’s distrust, skepticism, and disbelief in making people happy by projects of irrevocably happy worlds.

In “I’m Working on the World,” Szymborska uses utopian language. Her poetic statement refers to texts of culture that speak about the creation of the world, and that present the perfect order of human existence and coexistence. Unfortunately, the social paradise is not here but elsewhere, in an imaginary world. However, Szymborska wants to show the difference between the pronunciation of the works mentioned and her own, as it turns out, unskilled experimentation. Szymborska’s poet-demiurge was late for the day of creation. The world is already prepared. Only the title suggests that unlimited possibilities open up to the ruler of words. Meanwhile, this illusion quickly falls apart:

I’m working on the world,  
revised, improved edition,  
featuring fun for fools,  
blues for brooders,  
combs for bald pates,  
tricks for old dogs (“I’m Working on the World,” COY 55).

First of all, this world is just written. We should consider as a literary usurpation this ordering with words of the existing multitude of things. Second, creation is secondary. In other words: there was supposed to be the Book, but there only is a book, an inaccurate replica of the original. The subject submits to own will and rewrites the world. Szymborska’s poem “adds amendments to the existing world-record, to *Genesis*.”<sup>220</sup> The creator’s attitude turns into that of a proof-reader. The reservations and glosses seem to appear on the margins of *De rerum natura* by Lucretius. After all, Szymborska cannot seriously write the whole poem about the creation of the world that also explains the universal principles of existence.

“I’m Working on the World” seems to assume the appearance of fragments from *De rerum natura* only to show how the epicurean concept of practical knowledge

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220 J. Faryno, “Semiotyczne aspekty poezji o sztuce (na przykładzie wierszy Wisławy Szymborskiej),” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4/1975, pp. 142–143.

to overcome fears and sufferings does not work out. The speaker does not accept a world that can be fully explained. The attractiveness of such creation is illusory, because an order devoid of cognitive anxiety, the drama of subjective existence, and existential care turns out to be inhumane. To some extent, "I'm Working on the World" offers a simple and matter-of-fact reflection about Lucretius's view on the speech of animals or the aging of all things, including the world. For sure, creation's rejected possibilities and nature's failed tests described are close to Szymborska's bestiary and half-ironic mixing of evolution with mythology. In his educational epic, Lucretius discusses the impossible: "monsters, half-human, half-brute, would appear; sometimes tall branches would sprout from the trunk of a living creature; often the limbs of terrestrial and marine would be united."<sup>221</sup> Elsewhere, Lucretius eliminates the centaur from the creatures of nature; as he does to hybrids (cf. Szymborska's "Dear mermaids .../Beloved fauns," NEF 140). However, Szymborska's apostrophe to nonexistent animals reads:

your arms alongside, not instead of, wings  
 your, heaven help us, diphyletic skeletons  
 your ill-timed tails, horns sprouted out of spite,  
 illegitimate breaks, this morphogenetic potpourri, those  
 finned or furry frills and furbelows, the couplets  
 pairing human/heron with such cunning  
 that their offspring knows all, is immortal, and can fly ...  
 one that mother nature wouldn't like and won't allow ("Thomas Mann," NEF 140).

Lucretius's and Szymborska's imagination are similar, although her evolutionary treatise still offers other dimensions: grace, spite, humor, and verbal virtuosity. The further degradation of the maximalist plan to describe everything that exists indicates the allusion to the first Polish-language encyclopedia *Nowe Ateny* (New Athens) by Father Benedykt Chmielowski. The classification of facts is to occur according to the patterns of that bizarre work from 1745. A common feature of Lucretius's poem and Chmielowski's encyclopedia is the intention of gathering complete knowledge and attempt to fully explain the world.

Szymborska the modern poet does not believe in the creative abilities of the word, the examination of all nature in the universe, or the presentation of "all science." After all, in "I'm Working on the World," the author of the planned book wants to describe all the beings that exist (and do not exist), although the intention is ironic from the outset. However, since there already is the first edition of the world available, this revised edition is limited to additions and

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221 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, B. II, v. 702–705.

revisions, introduced by a degraded creator. The dream of poets of all times about the Book cannot come to fruition. Typically, the Book means the creation of a work in every respect perfect, in which all elements combine in a necessary and only possible way, so as to form a work capable of accommodating the entire cosmos. Moreover, the Book means the creation of a complete statement that is a universal tool for explaining the world, including man, nature, history, and the being of all times and places. Such Book would invalidate contingency and defeat nothingness.<sup>222</sup>

Szyborska advocates the second of the meanings, because the problem of aesthetic perfection is less important here. The creative gesture expressed in the poetic word is to establish a new harmony of the world. It is an attempt to eliminate ignorance, loneliness, and suffering. In such utopian Arcadia, love will not fade, and time will not interfere with lovers' affairs. The power of death in this ironic project is to be reduced: people perfectly master the art of reconciled peaceful dying.

Let us point out another important property of the Book: "if the Book is a record of wisdom, then it will defeat the absurdity of the world. To inscribe someone's existence in the Book is to give it meaning and intelligibility."<sup>223</sup> In Szyborska's "I'm Working on the World," silence surrounds the supernatural dimension of life, because the assumptions of the Book are to be incarnated only in the human world. In this case, "the Book of Wisdom" and "the Book of Life" are devoid of religious references. For now, the transformation of life occurs within poetry. The Book reveals its essence in every sentence. Poetry only offers existence, while hiding its most important principles. Explanations may be right or false. The Book becomes the necessary directive, the task for the cognizing subject, always in front of the writer, in the place to which we all strive in vain.

Szyborska utilizes motifs of the Book of Nature and the Book of Time.<sup>224</sup> The hidden writing that explains the mysteries of creation<sup>225</sup> paradoxically appears at once in full intelligibility. Nearly without cognitive effort. In poetic reality, nature speaks with beautiful and wisdom. It penetrates culture:

222 Cf. A. Ważyk, "Zagadki," *Twórczość* 8/1978, pp. 90–91; L. Flaszen, "Księga," in: *Cyrograf*, Kraków 1971, pp. 292–294.

223 A. Kamińska, *Twarze Księgi*, Warszawa 1982, p. 15.

224 Cf. J. Łukasiewicz, *Mieczysława Jastruna spotkania w czasie*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 372–381.

225 D. C. Maleszyński, "'Jedyna Księga'. Z dziejów toposu w literaturze dawnej," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3–4/1982.

This long-suspected meanings  
of rustlings, chirps, and growls!  
Soliloquies of forests!  
The epic hoots of owls!  
Those crafty hedgehogs drafting  
aphorisms after dark,  
while we blindly believe  
they're sleeping in the park! ("I'm Working on the World," COY 55).

"We may rhyme nature with culture because the world is a Book."<sup>226</sup> In Polish supported by playful one-syllable rhymes, Szymborska's poetic joke has two layers: it reveals the sudden eloquence of animals, who speak in intelligible languages, and the classification of these orations by species. As if nature perfectly knew our genological theories. The masterpieces were written by nature. All the wisdom is there. Literary ordering becomes superfluous. It is actually a repetition of the Book of Nature. We may understand this penetration of the "natural" speech of the world into culture as the dream of the original, paradisaical undifferentiation. All beings have been leveled with each other. Szymborska's "Interview with a Child" would confirm such approach, as the child's consciousness registers only creatures endowed with subjectivity.

Szymborska undermines the anthropocentric approach. In poems that show cruelty or empathy toward animals ("Brueghel's Two Monkeys," "Tarsier," "Seen from Above," "Łańcuchy" – Chains), she presents animals and people in "a common subordination to the always cruel verdicts of fate."<sup>227</sup> But also "I'm Working on the World" speaks about the erasing of human loneliness among natural beings, about the reconstruction of the lost relationship with nature: "Even a simple "Hi there,"/when traded with a fish, makes both the fish and you/feel quite extraordinary" ("I'm Working on the World," COY 55).

The illusion of understanding is different, as in Bruno Schulz's prose that fantasizes about the deceptive language of birds, for instance in "Spring:" "That is why this story, modeled on that text [of birds], has stretched out on many branching tracks, and will be thoroughly interspersed with springtime dashes, sighs, and ellipses."<sup>228</sup> "The grammar of speech" is similar, as is the mastery of the word and sophisticated conceptismo. However, Szymborska's world of poetic

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226 A. Legeżyńska, *Wisława Szymborska*, Poznań 1996, p. 71.

227 K. Pietrych, "O czym mówią zwierzęta (u Szymborskiej)," in: *Niepojęty przypadek. O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej*, p. 286.

228 B. Schulz, *Collected Stories*, transl. Madeline G. Levine, Chicago 2018, p. 105.

creation is to embody the impossible. Nature's secrets immediately appear with explanatory indexes. It is really hard to believe in such a Book of Nature.

In Szymborska's poetry, penetration into the natural order saves from artificiality (e.g. "Reszta," The Remainder) as the memory of the beginnings of the species and the relationship with the whole natural existence serves to limit the proud anthropocentrism.<sup>229</sup> Suffice to mention "Thomas Mann," "A Speech Speech at the Lost-and-Found," "Nothing's a Gift," and "The Silence of Plants." The biological form of existence is the only sure basis for other types of human activity; equipped with a separate consciousness, it also exhibits a distinct wisdom ("To My Heart, on Sunday," "Allegro ma Non Troppo"). And finally, nature is a witness of human actions and a judge of collective moral insanity ("Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition," "Tarsier").

Szymborska's speaker finds it equally difficult to compose the Book of Time:

Time (Chapter Two) retains  
its sacred right to meddle  
in each earthly affair.  
Still, time's unbounded power  
that makes a mountain crumble,  
moves seas, rotates a star,  
won't be enough to tear  
lovers apart: they are  
too naked, too embraced,  
too much like timid sparrows ("I'm Working on the World," COY 55-56).

What strikes here above all is the biblical stylization of the periphrastic description of time. Powerful time changes the entire universe. Only lovers escape its rule. So, love overcomes time? Can it be immortal? That is, as an idea and not in individual cases? Lovers who are not subject to time, of course, deny the myths of European culture. For example, the myth of Tristram and Iseult, about which Denis de Rougemont writes, "Happy love has no history.... passionate love a tonce shared and fought against, anxious for a happiness it rejects, and magnified in its own disaster – *unhappy mutual love*."<sup>230</sup>

This success of love without dramatic turns and struggles makes no entertaining story. It needs no poetry. What is there to compensate, relive in word, or elevate, when love lasts invariably, and its heavenly experience has no admixture

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229 See P. Kuncewicz, "Chytróść rozumu (o poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej)," in: *Cień ręki. Szkice o poezji*, Łódź 1977, pp. 183-184; J. Gondowicz, "Oswajanie poezją," *Kultura* 15/1973.

230 D. de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, transl. M. Belgion, Princeton 1983, p. 52.

of hell? In another poem by Szymborska we find a significant addition to this point: "True love. Is it necessary?/Tact and common sense tell us to pass over it in silence,/like a scandal in Life's highest circles" ("True Love," CH 190). On the other hand, love raises humanity to a higher level and, for Szymborska, is an exception on the scale of the entire cosmos; so that both human history and the history of the universe must work for true love to happen, while contingency must change into the order of fate ("Love at First Sight").

A paradox emerges here. By funding a better world order, literature destroys itself. Szymborska's invented world bridles the cruelty of biology and death works with anesthesia. The Arcadian topos can be applied to a limited extent. However, death is present in Arcadia. These are not the Fortunate Isles outside the area of possible experiences. The laws of existence are not suspended, rather their quality changes. Moreover, the way of experiencing is different. Is it better? Elegant suffering lacks humiliation, pathos, or excessive expression. It that does not deform the body. Nearly forgotten, it excludes pain. Such suffering is traces and relics of real pain. Maybe only memory of past horrors. In the project of the Book, suffering is aesthetic: "Suffering (Chapter Three)/doesn't insult the body./ Death? It comes in your sleep,/exactly as it should" ("I'm Working on the World," COY 56).

Death without the awareness of dying is another of such inventions. The revision of the first edition of the world therefore consist of a consolatory therapy aimed at the destruction of pain and fear of suffering. But what simultaneously disappears is the subjective response to the extreme challenges of existence. Happy people will not encounter this kind of degrading plagues. Maybe we do not have to pay such a high price for wisdom:

When it comes, you'll be dreaming  
that you don't need to breathe;  
that breathless silence is  
the music of the dark  
and it's part of the rhythm  
to vanish like a spark ("I'm Working on the World," COY 56).

This poem minimizes suffering and diminishes the power of death. The torments of existence can be graded ("To die/just that much. And to live just so," COY 56). We should take from the existing world only a few experiences and especially the better ones. The language of manifestos usually declares the establishment of something that has not yet existed: it adds new ideas to the existing state of affairs and extends the boundaries of reality. Meanwhile, Szymborska's poem-manifesto heads in the opposite direction: it wants to take away the passing, the excess of

old age, and the excess of death. After all, we were promised too much. The way out consists in limitation. This is negative prometeism.

The order of the Book and the dream of a brave new world support each other in shaping the ideal vision. Szymborska only gives a list of chapters, an outline, a sketch. But she plans everything in bad faith: it is impossible to compose the Book. We should read "I'm Working on the World" as an example of utopia or a projection of a better human reality. Indeed, utopian manner of thinking appears in the poem, but the speaker continually disavows these sudden revelations of another world and discards them with irony. Where should this better reality hide? In the space created by the poem, not in concrete topography.

This distinction is useful because traditional utopias have used a specific or imaginary place on Earth, but never admitted their exclusively literary provenance. Utopia is an "anti-world," an alternative world, and one juxtaposed to the norms and customs of an era. For example, the Enlightenment utopian thought considered the laws of nature as a model for the ideal society.<sup>231</sup> Szymborska's poem never considers any social particulars. The utopian thought involves other circles: existence and cognition. Although faith in the completion of the radiant vision turns out to be very limited. Thus, Szymborska's imagination is the type of escapist utopias, those directed against the existing world. "I'm Working on the World" is close to the "utopia of eternal order."<sup>232</sup> We may even apply to Szymborska's poetic concepts the following names: utopia of excessive clarity ("Here's one chapter: The Speech/of Animals and Plants./Each species comes, of course,/with its own dictionary," "I'm Working on the World," COY 55) and utopia of the unconscious understood as the liberation from the hardships of existence.

We will not find in "I'm Working on the World" any allusions to the basic canon of (anti)utopian literature – Plato, Saint Augustine, More, Campanella, Bacon, Huxley, Orwell – besides general principles of how to construct a better world. The clearest are the utopian threads from the Bible.<sup>233</sup> Although they are more visible in the much later "Utopia" from the volume *A Large Number*. The obvious explanation is less fascinating than mystery. Human life deprived of

231 See J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 94–95.

232 J. Szacki, *Spotkania z utopią*, Warszawa 1980, pp. 48–53.

233 See A. E. Morgan, "The Origins of Utopia," in: *Nowhere and Somewhere. How History Makes Utopias and How Utopias Make History*, Chapel Hill 1946, pp. 97–100.



cognitive anxiety loses the taste of searching and is stripped of many important meanings. Therefore, the knowledge about the world must be continuously verified:

Island where all becomes clear.  
 Solid ground beneath your feet.  
 The only roads are those that offer access.  
 Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.  
 The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here  
 with branches disentangled since time immemorial....

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.  
 Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.  
 For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,  
 and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches  
 turn without exception to the sea ("Utopia," LN 232).

The idea of the Fortunate Isles mixes in "Utopia" with the image of biblical paradise, enriched with new details in the landscape of knowledge and wisdom. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not the only one here. This ideal space also hosts the Tree of Valid Supposition and the Tree of Understanding. The garden of initiation is propagating quite lush. What follows is very subverse and exact reversal of the proportions from the Garden of Eden. Ignorance and uncertainty find here not even a small patch or a modest lawn. The center of knowledge and wisdom is everywhere. Everywhere in the "utopia of the place" the most important mysteries can be easily explained. The excess of images that define full cognition and the entire collection of colloquialisms that mean we understand everything show the absurd of our longing for certainty about our presence in the world. We cannot free ourselves from intrusive explanations as we encounter an excess of answers.

Szymborska reevaluates myths and utopian expectations, which is very important for her own work. With delicate didacticism, like the smiling Enlightenment philosophers, Szymborska shows the emptiness of people's dreams of easy happiness, of wisdom acquired without error, risk, or hardship, and of experience without suffering. For Szymborska views humans as seekers. Even a walk on the moon is such a cognitive journey, guided by a utopian project. What lacks on the moon is the New Atlantis: "I don't expect even a shriveled leaf,/to say nothing of silver palaces and gardens,/venerable elders, righteous laws,/wisdom in crystal balls, but still" ("Pursuit," CH 174). The winner of the new space only sees her own shadow, which is a clear sign; that is, wherever we find ourselves, we remain lonely with our unresolvable problems.

Let us also consider a utopia of knowledge, in which everything has been already recognized, classified, and interpreted. The gist of scientific certainty would be inviolable, and one could only add details. The basic cognitive effort already happened, so now there is only the joy of completing. What weight has such lightness. Szymborska writes about it with keen humor:

A few centuries ago, Aristotle experienced a dignified though sad adventure after his death. Medieval thinkers decided that his oeuvre is the alpha and omega of human knowledge.... We should sympathize with every thinker that shared or will share a similar fate. The fate of a stopper to close the flask with knowledge (WLN 241).

Wisdom given and not gained or won is a dubious gift for us. Knowledge without moral and intellectual merit is worthless. A calm reconciliation with life after annulling metaphysical fear is also undesirable. Here emerges the absurdity of the mass possession of the secrets of existence. Thus, Szymborska solves the problem of the utopia of excessive clarity. She approaches the utopia of the existential unconscious in a similar manner. The cover-up of the truth that we die, the elimination of eschatological reflection, and the removal of the experience of temporality make for a very ambiguous immortality. Szymborska creates an anti-world in poetry as a reaction to real experiences with a self-persuasive and -didactic edge.

Utopia tempts with the possibilities of broad creative gesture and simultaneously shows the helplessness of the demiurge. Utopia rebels against the colloquial obviousness of the rules of life but also teaches the poet-creator humility toward the truly mundane laws. The knowledge of utopia is worthwhile for the thinking and reflective subject: "Designing a utopia ... is an act of self-illumination of thought about its own hidden mechanism."<sup>234</sup>

"I'm Working on the World" is an anti-utopia, in which the illusion of Elysium falls apart. Its ideal world has uncertain boundaries and cannot break away from visible reality.<sup>235</sup> The return to reality questions creation. The *raison d'être* of the better world, established in the poetic word, encounters real existence, which "has its own reason for being" ("Possibilities," PB 41), because "all the lyrical paths of Szymborska lead to the [real] world."<sup>236</sup>

234 G. Picht, "Technika i utopia," transl. K. Wolicki, in: *Odwaga utopii*, Warszawa 1981, p. 199.

235 Cf. B. Latawiec, "Fenomen popularności," *Nurt* 2/1977, p. 25.

236 A. Stankowska, "Wyobrażenia a fikcja. Poeta – cud nienaturalny. Szymborska o kondycji człowieka i artysty," in: *Kształt wyobraźni. Z dziejów sporu o "wizję" i "równanie"*, Kraków 1998, p. 167.

Denied ideas of other possible realities do not disappear completely. In Szymborska's poetry, they delineate the necessary path of exploration. The returning dream of a better world – perfect and harmonious – can never be fulfilled in a satisfactory shape.

## The Helpless Demiurge

“The Joy of Writing” is a special poem, repeatedly interpreted by critics, which lost none of its attractiveness to this day. The piece entered many anthologies of Polish poetry. Critics often return to “The Joy of Writing.”<sup>237</sup> In colloquial perception, the work is a showcase or essential abbreviation of the entire poetic work of Wisława Szymborska. In the polly by *Polityka* weekly (1996): “The poem ... entitled “The Joy of Writing” received the unofficial title of the most beautiful poem written in Polish after the war.”<sup>238</sup>

The vocabulary that critics apply to describe Szymborska's poetry particularly often contrasts two formulas: reckless discovering of new worlds in literature (“The joy of writing”) collides with serious reflection on the existential entanglement of art directed against death (“Revenge of a mortal hand”). The poem was admired for its apt generalization and accurate expression.

Wisława rejects many components of self-reflective poetry in “The Joy of Writing:” the psychology of a creative act, programmatic confessions about the idea of word, and attempts to determine the artist's place in the world. The speaker informs us not about *how* she writes, but *that* she writes. Indeed, all writing opposes speech and turns surprise into convention. Script imbues words with a separate status. The permanence of characters that form a text opposes fleeting life. Szymborska ostentatiously emphasizes the arbitrariness of the created images. They exist only in the reality of writing:

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237 Among other places in: M. Wyka, “Wisława Szymborska; Radość pisania,” w: *Czytając wiersze*, ed. J. Maciejewski, Warszawa 1973; J. Witan, “Radość pisania,” *Polonistyka* 3/1968; S. Burkot, “Wisława Szymborska: “Wieczór autorski”; Radość pisania”; “Pod jedną gwiazdką,” in: *Spotkania z poezją współczesną*, Warszawa 1977; E. Balcerzan, “Radość pisania,” in: *Poezja polska w latach 1939–1965*, p. I: *Strategie liryczne*, Warszawa 1982; T. Nyczek, “Po raz ósmy (“Radość pisania”),” in: *22 x Szymborska*, Poznań 1997; K. Kłosiński, “Radość pisania, żaloba pisania. “Radość pisania” Wisławy Szymborskiej,” in: *Poezja żalu*, Katowice 2001.

238 A. Frajlich, “Najpiękniejszy polski wiersz...,” *Przegląd Polski* [“Tygodniowy Dodatek Literacko- Społeczny” to “Nowy Dziennik”], New York 21.03.1996, p. 1.

Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?  
 For a drink of written water from a spring  
 whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?  
 Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?  
 Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,  
 she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.  
 Silence — this word also rustles across the page  
 and parts the boughs  
 that have sprouted from the word “woods” (“The Joy of Writing,” NEF 109).

From the first sentence, Szyborska multiplies words related to writing (“written doe,” “written water”), names of devices and techniques of notation (“xerox,” “page,” “pen,” “ink”), and language components (“word,” “letters,” “clauses”). She deforms colloquialisms. The phrase “black on white” simultaneously means clarity and obviousness and – paper blackened with writing. Similarly, the phrase “bind with chains of signs” connotes creation and enslavement; after all, it means capturing time in a literary work. The literal meaning of the “chains” does not disappear, but the “chains of signs” are the name of the described syntagma. A similar semantic node appears in the poetic use of the word “rustles.” Wood and paper rustle alike permeate into the created world as the notation process. Everyday tools of notation like paper and ink may enter into the discussion about literary worlds as incarnate potentiality:

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply  
 of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,  
 prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,  
 surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns (“The Joy of Writing,” NEF 109).

Paper landscape cannot be spontaneous. The writing hand is an extension of this landscape. We know not whether the game of creating a world will succeed. This world only now comes to be, since the project in the mind of the artist has yet no finite shape.

The conceptual excess of terms related to writing is significant. This is how one tests the mastery of execution. The poem surprises us with its ability to convey so many meanings in one field of associations. However, great command over words does not yet establish full power over the created world. Szyborska repetitively challenges the effectiveness of the creative act. Quotation marks signal these doubts or embarrassment:

Is there then a world  
 where I rule absolutely on fate?

A time I bind with chains of signs?  
 An existence become endless at my bidding ("The Joy of Writing," NEF 109)?

"The Joy of Writing" mixes the language of the matter with metalanguage. However, "signs of signs" serve here not linguistic analysis but submit to the poetic story. Szyborska equates these two levels of expression. This means that there separates from and returns to the emerging whole a commentary on the principles of the creation of a text, which we are currently reading. Thus, the described events occur in word and in the world.

The difference between the technical dimension of notation and the intangible mysterious process of creating artistic ideas disappears here. What undergoes a significant change is the writer's inefficient desk space, where continues her duel with the white piece of paper. Above this space (of mostly torment) floats a new world, which we should view with reserve. From the very beginning it is a phantom. What accompanies creation is repeated amazement whether the writer can really become a demiurge. Question marks undermine the solemnity of the artist's work and the finite nature of the created work. Apparently, Szyborska's demiurge is embarrassed by her own calling. We should distinguish between the Romantic myth of a separate poetic universe and the contemporary skeptical act of creation, filled with reservations. Thus, the "the power of preserving" (SP 6) limits itself.

The artist's hesitation prevents complete creation. But maybe the elements of the poetic reality are unorthodox. Let us consider the motif of the doe. It reminds of Julian Tuwim's metaphor for poetry, which juxtaposes the long cultural tradition with modern barbaric civilization. Tuwim's "Horatian doe" means in Szyborska's work the immutability of cultural signs. "The Joy of Writing" also alludes to Norwid's doe from his poem "Do piszących" (To Writers), even more connected with writing than Tuwim's expression.

Norwid's poem metaphorically describes the thought that defies the fulfilled shape of an artwork. Record deprives fresh idea of its beauty. The record destroys the creative intention of the idea. The world of writing is dead also because writing fades. Norwid links the lesson of vanity with the hope that readers will revive the poem. In turn, Szyborska's poem sheds light on the temptation to suspend the act of writing, as the faith in word's creative power erodes. Text may assume the form of "clauses so subordinate" (SP 5) that the doe will be killed. But the speaker does not choose this option.

We may seek relationships of "The Joy of Writing" with less-than-noble cultural fields. As I mentioned above, demiurgic power runs out quickly. Should one finish the creative act, it would surely prove that a well-illuminated painting appears frighteningly banal. Szyborska's poem does not show any "medieval

tapestry with a forest, a lady, and an animal,”<sup>239</sup> but rather a marketplace tapestry or an oil painting from a fair. If a doe then at a waterhole, if the doe and waterhole then a hunter should appear due to the irrefutable logic of the composition. At this point emerges the contradiction between kitschy material and high artistic quality of expression. Szymborska’s sophisticated literary game rejects simple imagery. Of course, we should not believe her declared naivety.<sup>240</sup> We should read the landscape scene of the doe and hunter as a warning: spontaneous joy of writing that is unaware of the pitfalls of language may easily become “joyful creativity.” It is creative diarrhea that Szymborska often criticizes in her *Poczta literacka*.

Poetic irony in “The Joy of Writing” includes more and more levels of expression. The knowledge that the written world is ruled by conventions results in further restrictions of the demiurge’s activities. The rights imposed by the artist function only in the world of phantasmagoria. The objects and words in one space rebel against the artist’s will: “They forget that what’s here isn’t life” (NEF 109). Paradoxically, fiction wants to be verifiable. However, writing is an act that follows its own rules. It does not simply interact with reality to interfere in the real nonfictional existence. The only verifiable truth is that “something is being written.”

Readers want to find a more real world in literature than the one the experience directly. This is when Szymborska’s questions about the separate life of the invented objects finds a justification: the imagination of others participates in the creation of meanings. The writer shares her responsibility with readers. What is the being created with words? Certainly, it is a being doomed to the insufficiency of existence. The field of poetic imagination implies “going beyond the received world, sometimes even freeing oneself from it by creating – seemingly – a new world.”<sup>241</sup> This “seemingly” is the axis of poetic argument. The theme evolves in “The Joy of Writing” in a specific way. We see a change from delight in art – “an existence become endless” (NEF 110) – to questions about the reality of the created world. Truth can be verified only within the accepted poetic style. Reflection on literature – conducted here by Szymborska as if in passing – sets the right proportion of creative usurpations.

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239 J. Rogoziński, “Nie starczy ust...,” in: *Preteksty. Szkice o współczesnej poezji polskiej*, Warszawa 1985, p. 149.

240 See T. Walas, “Poetka jako czytelniczka,” in: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej*, p. 329.

241 R. Ingarden, *Studia z estetyki*, Vol. I, Warszawa 1957, p. 398.

Writing has power over time and victory over the transience of things. However, the paths of life develop elsewhere. The miracle of capturing time can only occur in poetry. In this sense, Szymborska's demiurge is helpless and unsure. Everything depends on the poet. Nothing depends on the poet. The created world boils down to the whims of the "I" that exists in time and is limited by time.

Literature is a game of artificial existence reduced to the area of language. "The Joy of Writing" confronts the role of a crippled artist with the universal principle of the fulfillment of fate as Being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). The transformation of irrevocable rights of existence into a moment divided "into tiny eternities" (NEF 109) is just an illusion of time control:

The joy of writing.  
The power of preserving.  
Revenge of a mortal hand ("The Joy of Writing," NEF 110).

Triumph is limited, but we should not underestimate this rebellion against the laws of existence. The proof of the victory of poetry is perfectly imprinted in language: in the lengthening phrase of following verses. That is how the hand trace was captured and no one can undo that *signum*. In the order of culture, the impossibility of stopping time is something ordinary and ungraspable. Szymborska returns to the problem of the incompatibility of the moment recorded in artwork and the passing of human life, among others, in "Landscape," "Wrong Number," "The People on the Bridge."

The joy of writing is a poetic ability. Virtuoso fluency with words, styles, and traditions. But that is not enough. The role of the word art is not to create beautiful words. "The Joy of Writing" offers not even a small fragment that would refer to disputes over poetic technique; there is not even a single aesthetic declaration. "A poet that engages in the debate about the so-called means of expression is lost."<sup>242</sup> This case combines poetry with other tasks: it is a serious game with existence expressed in the language of irony. Despite everything, poetry as the "revenge of a mortal hand" (NEF 110) opposes disintegration. It saves values and gives meaning to human life.

Szymborska's poetry never separates the difficult and beautiful art of writing from our presence in the world; from disturbing questions and attempts to penetrate the mysteries of life. Writing hides the torment of fighting against time but

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242 A. Międzyrzeczki, "Świat w człowieku," *Nowe Książki* 20/1962, p. 1233.

also offers hope. Thus may appear the paradoxical “I” that has creative aspirations and mortal nature: in the imperfect but the only possible way.

## Revisions, Voices

Poetic revision is to reconcile the order of reality and the worlds imagined with poetic word, but Szymborska usually reveals their discrepancy. Besides the projected literary whole, there always is an irremovable surplus of omitted and overlooked phenomena, a feeling of an incommensurability, a mismatch of words and things.

Szymborska’s poetry sometimes erases boundaries between classes of objects (“In Heraclitus’s River”) or closes the linearity of time at one point (“Water”). However, her poetic reflection more often wanders in the opposite direction, namely the presentation of various dimensions of reality. For instance, there returns the idea of questioning (even for a moment) the laws of matter or the order to cross the boundaries of one’s subjectivity. Irony usually restrains admiration for created worlds, as the multiplicity of things remains ungraspable. The “metaphysical pluralism” recognized by Jerzy Kwiatkowski – in the spirit of Leibniz’s philosophy – along with the qualitative separation and situation of things in the world is reflected in the variety of individual artistic solutions.<sup>243</sup> The microcosm of human affairs does not reflect the macrocosm of the whole existence. Szymborska’s poetry sets exception against the rule: the essence escapes existence.

The ontologically unstable reality of the borderline of creation and existence is richer here than each considered separately. Order, perfection, and durability are complemented by movement, mutability, and contingency. Szymborska’s worlds reflect on themselves to discover their own deficiencies. As Julian Kornhauser begins his sketch: “Szymborska does not know or see just one world. There are two competing worlds. The real world and the fake world, the tactile one and the written one. The written one is created and revised. It shines with different meanings that she meticulously inscribes, with attention and love, to a poetic album.”<sup>244</sup>

Szymborska connects the game between what is present and what is absent with revisions of wholes that others prematurely deemed closed. Sometimes something happens against the obvious laws of time. The revision reveals a

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243 J. Kwiatkowski, “Przedmowa,” in: W. Szymborska, *Poezje*, Warszawa 1977, pp. 8–9.

244 J. Kornhauser, “Czarodziejstwo,” in: *Światło wewnętrzne*, Kraków-Wrocław 1984.



multilateral dialog of the lyrical “I” with figures of human reality. We should distinguish a separate subject here: she questions the autonomous rights of artistic creation.

What I call revision is the poetic interference in the current order of things; in two ways: the revision of the form and the revision of the meaning of the world, the real one and the written one. Szymborska’s poems span two planes of revisionary activities: the sphere of poetic ontology and the area of reading testimonies, the recorded messages about the world. The former shows a violation of the “natural” order, when the writer pretends to be a demiurge in good and bad faith. The latter interprets phenomena by describing alternative solutions or transgressing established patterns and ways of understanding. This is when poetic thought raises objections and incites rebellion.

Revision would be unnecessary if there were no errors, imperfections, or outrageous omissions in the very foundations of our lives. The perfect world can only be accepted. Emil Cioran writes that writing is the retaliation and answer of creation to the shoddy job of the Creator.<sup>245</sup> However, it is an incompetent demurge that creates compensational worlds in Szymborska’s poetry. Thus, the revised version requires another revision. Only cold perfection can last unchanged. However, every human error results from something. Mistakes mean a search, not necessarily a lack of preparation. “All mistakes are correct!”<sup>246</sup>

The stress that Szymborska lies on revision makes us wonder how her particular artistic decisions reveal a worldview based on amendments, voices, and commentaries. The following roles are available to the speakers of Szymborska’s poems:

1. The artist-creator (“I’m Working on the World,” “The Joy of Writing”) who resides “above” the presented world. Her omnipotence emerges from a system of limitations. Markedly, she keeps distance to creative usurpations and a hope connected with creating the space of freedom in a poem.
2. A character from a literary text or painting (e.g. “Soliloquy for Cassandra,” “Landscape,” “A Byzantine Mosaic”) placed inside of an artwork. The poem utilizes a monolog or dialog of such characters. Sometimes we read a report in reported speech. Traditional patterns of thought and inertia-driven schemes encounter scrutinizing reflection, which opposes the obvious. Past protagonist’s imaginations – present in myth, letters, or literary texts – collide

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245 E. M. Cioran, “Wyznanie,” transl. J. M. Kłoczowski, *Zeszyty Literackie* 54/1996, p. 38.

246 N. Słonimsky, *Sluch absolutny*, transl. R. Śmietana, Kraków 1996, p. 168.

with the director of the lyrical situation, who introduces modern experience (e.g. "Synopsis," "Lot's Wife," "The Letters of the Dead," "Frozen Motion").

3. The reader-interpreter placed outside of the represented world. She is interested not in the result of the artist's work but in the life circumstances of the creation of the poem ("The Classic"). The distance from which she speaks about the creative abilities and usurpations grows without end ("The People on the Bridge"). Her readings of commented works respect no rules, to the extent that there may appear small additions or completely new apocrypha. We should call the latter case not revision but gloss (e.g. "Rubens' Women," "Theater Impressions," "In a Mail Coach"). History preserved in an artwork (or an ordinary object) appears from the viewpoint of a version of events that was lacking or silenced by the conventions of art under scrutiny.

Let us remember about Szyborska's verbalization of the sheer act of writing, painting, glossing, or erasing. Moreover, Szyborska broadly employs vocabulary related to script, material, technique, and mechanisms that change the world into the text: "The unshakeable printing sign/will not pass on the trembling of my writing hand." ("This day," PZS 12); "Hear the ballad "Murdered Woman ...// penned/neither to shock nor to offend" ("Ballad," S 78); "I don't see the crabbed and blotted draft/that hides behind the Song of Songs" ("Landscape," NEF 113); "I was filled with feelings and sensations./Now all that's like/a line of dots in parentheses" ("May 16, 1973," EB 304); "if in black on white, .../question marks are placed,/and if in response, a colon:" ("In Fact Every Poem," C 383).

Trespassing the borders of the worlds inspires Szyborska's imagination. The metamorphoses of people and things are only possible in specially-designated regions of reality. Szyborska willingly uses the spatial metaphor to mark the individual separation of experiences. In such way she defines the place of dreams: "Little girls .../In the grand boudoir of a wink/they all turn into beautiful Helens" ("A Moment in Troy," S 63). The world of psychology mixes with poetics of vision. The inner eye views the blink of an image developed like a photograph in the depths of memory. The confession dedicated to the deceased precisely determines the meeting space: "He appears on the other side of my eyelids,/in the one and only world that he can reach" ("Dream," S 95). The world under the eyelids is fragile, threatened by the dissolving of substance, and affected by breakdown: "Everything is mine but just on loan,/... though mine as long as I look" ("Travel Elegy," S 71).

Szyborska's poetry respect every detail of reality, which she directs against the disappearance of existence into nonexistence and constant shortages in poetic inventories. Her close attention focuses on concrete objects. "The saved

detail is rather a supplement to the full “omnipresent” world than an element of exchange; the revision is positive.”<sup>247</sup>

The act of revision includes many planes of poetic expression: from ontological solutions to the seemingly most trivial decisions in the use of the word. Poetic revision expresses axiological opposition to the existing laws and norms. Each classification attempted by Szymborska is only sketchy and approximates things. Each of the above sentences about revision require the supplement of a revising commentary.

Szymborska’s poetic world appears in borderland areas:<sup>248</sup> between what is real and invented by the word, between designates and names, between things and their representation in memory, between the real world and dreams, between actual events and their negative reflection. The anti-world is the unrealized, assumed, and hypothetical version of the existing reality. It means that Szymborska calls into existence fantastic realities and literal phantasmagoria, which result from the anxiety of the inquiring mind alongside heretical and rebellious imagination. Because belief in the creating power of words is not possible – we may only admire, amaze, and defend it – nor is total agreement for the real world. The music of this world does not at all resemble the harmony of the spheres:

let’s act like very special guests of honor  
at the district fireman’s ball,  
dance to the beat of the local oompah band,  
and pretend that it’s the ball  
to end all balls (“The Ball,” M 348).

The boundaries of the world in Szymborska’s poetry expand beyond the colloquial measure. Her world combines existence and nonexistence. Szymborska seemingly bizarrely mixes simple empiricism with what is only potential or what only belongs to culture. She places things and categories on one plane to reveal the dialectics of knowledge and ignorance. This attempt of a separate poetic whole is meant to capture the world in its variety of forms, its existence in many shapes. Szymborska chose not the path of her great predecessors Mallarmé, Rilke, and Leśmian. She does not seek to create a separate autonomous poetic cosmos, but only seeks confirmation for her own created worlds in the experience of

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247 P. Michałowski, “Wzruszający “szczegół niewzruszony”” w: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej*, p. 193.

248 For more about the “poetics of the borderland,” see Sandauer, “Na przykład Szymborska,” pp. 418–419.

everyday life. She does not believe her imagination and suspects the intellect. She develops a poetic language based on a constant revision of traditional artistic solutions. She quarrels with canons of literary expression and everyday speech. She does write off the world of things nor does she want to form a perfectly beautiful word.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Polish Editions of Szymborska's Works

(only used in absence of English translation)

DŻ – *Dlatego żyjemy*

PZS – *Pytania zadawane sobie*

RdDD – *Rymowanki dla dużych dzieci*

CP – *Czarna piosenka*

WLN – *Wszystkie lektury nadobowiązkowe*

LN I-III – *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*

### English Editions of Szymborska's Works

(all poems from Wisława Szymborska, *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, transl. Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak, New York 2016)

NR – *Nonrequired Readings: Prose Pieces*, transl. Clare Cavanagh, New York 2002

UP – *from the Unpublished Collection* (1944–1948)

WWL – *Why We Live* (1952)

QAY – *Questions You Ask Yourself* (1954)

COY – *Calling Out to Yeti* (1957)

S – *Salt* (1962)

NEF – *No End of Fun* (1967)

CH – *Could Have* (1972)

LN – *A Large Number* (1976)

PB – *The People on the Bridge* (1986)

EB – *The End and the Beginning* (1993)

M – *Moment* (2002)

C – *Colon* (2005)

H – *Here* (2009)

E – *Enough* (2011)

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